SUB\versions
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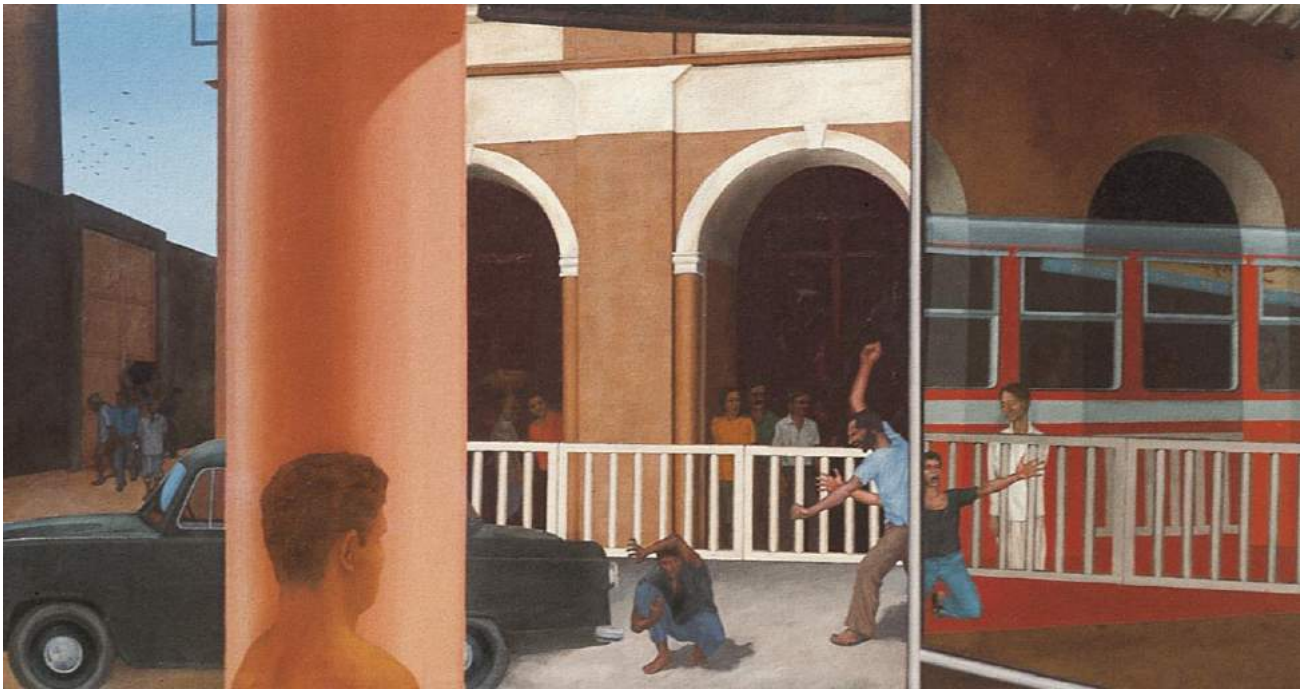

Sudhir Patwardhan, 'Street Play', 1981, Oil on Canvas, 36x72 inches. Coll-Roopankar Museum, Bhopal, India.

TISS RE-IMAGINING FUTURES

School of Media and Cultural Studies
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Editorial Note

The present issue of *SubVersions*, being published after a long and unavoidable hiatus, brings together disparate themes and perspectives in ways only the allied areas of Media and Cultural Studies can. It is a mosaic of critical studies of institutions and practices, texts and contexts, and audiences and publics. With their many arms with which they do—or at least attempt—many things at once, Media and Cultural Studies are uniquely placed, with a whole generation of young scholars in the country unencumbered by disciplinary boundaries and expectations to carry out urgent and critical work on contemporary concerns.

The first two papers in this issue engage with enduring as well as evolving communities of performers in the context of rapid urban transformations of Delhi and Chennai, respectively. In the paper that follows, a close reading of a radical and emancipatory anti-caste text is used to raise crucial questions of historiography. The next two papers concern themselves with cinema. While in the first, textual analysis of films from prominent chroniclers of the Indian middle-class reveals the work that produces the domestic space of home, in the other paper, the author critiques the persisting interest of large Hollywood studios in peddling orientalist narratives and tropes in order to exploit markets in the Global South. The last paper in the issue is a case study on the use and efficacy of comics against the backdrop of democratisation of media in general and as a tool of social change in particular.

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Not a Land of Street Magicians
A Study on Intergenerational Mobility among the Maseit Street Magicians of Kathputli Colony, Delhi[1]

Devangna Singh, Dikshit Sarma Bhagabati, Ishan Vijay, and Malini Chidambaram

ABSTRACT

This paper examines intergenerational mobility among the Maseit street magicians of Kathputli Colony, Delhi. For centuries, these magicians have nourished and practised the art of street magic, passing it on from one generation in the family to another. However, in the face of changing times—including vectors like better education, governmental apathy, competition by stage magicians, and other forms of mass entertainment—there looms a pertinent doubt if this traditional performative art would survive for even one more generation. The Maseit have globally popularised their settlement, Kathputli Colony, for its dense concentration of street performers, but it is now being demolished to give way to a skyscraper. Furthermore, going strictly by the law, their act is no more legal than beggary. (The law, colloquially known as the Bombay Beggary Act, 1959, was repealed in August 2018.) Our research embarks on an ethnographic journey to explore the dynamics of the Maseit's performance, the equation of intergenerationality in the community, and the poetics and politics of inheritance, learning, and cultural expression.

[1] We would have never gained such intimate access to the Maseit's fascinating world without the support of Ishamuddin Khan. We are immensely grateful to him and his family, specifically his daughter Yasmin and son Zuman, for welcoming us wholeheartedly. In fact, we remain in unpayable debt of the whole Maseit community in Kathputli Colony for confiding in us. Dr Mani Shekhar Singh supervised this research, for which we owe him our sincerest thanks. His guidance and provocations throughout the ethnography and his comments on an earlier draft of the essay were instrumental in refining the manuscript. Finally, we thank the anonymous reviewer and the editorial staff of *SubVersions* for co-labouring with us in publishing this essay.

KEYWORDS

street magic, Maseit, Kathputli colony, performing arts, intergenerational mobility, Delhi Development Authority, traditional art, the Great Indian Rope Trick, Indian Street Performers Association Trust (ISPAT), Bombay Beggary Act, ostensible poverty, status abusers, stigma

WAYFARERS: STREET MAGICIANS AND THEIR LIFE STORIES

The murky slum dwelling, no larger than 13 x 13 feet, is too small to house both Fariduddin Khan's[2] family and his paraphernalia, and the lighting too dingy to complement the sparkle with which he speaks about his shows and feats performed abroad. The paint on the walls that are adorned with photographs, certificates, and the odd memorabilia is beginning to wear off, as though serving a grim reminder to the residents of Kathputli Colony that their temporary stay at the transit camp has far exceeded life in the narrow, lively lanes of Anand Parbat. As bulldozers threaten to ravage their old home in the Colony, promises of rehabilitation have despairingly stagnated into muddy, mosquito-infested puddles spread ubiquitously around the transit camp.

It is by combating this deprivation and poverty that Fariduddin Khan has scripted his career, illustrious abroad but little known back home. Having performed all over the world, from Japan to England, Fariduddin is trying his best to be humble about his achievements to us. Pointing towards a photograph with him and Penn and Teller in the frame, he unassumingly remarks how they had come seeking him all the way to his place. The internationally acclaimed duo had come to Kathputli Colony just to see Fariduddin perform his Great Indian Rope Trick, and perhaps to also transpose titbits of it to their stage back in Los Angeles—a remarkable exchange between the living tradition that street magic is and the mass entertainment that stage magic has become.

Fariduddin has carefully hung spotlessly framed envelopes from his eldest son Altmas, who is studying performing arts at a university in the north-eastern state of Assam. Pinned on the wall beside his bed,

[2] All names in the essay have been changed for anonymity.

those are epistles from a distant land frozen in time where no one from the community has ever ventured into—not Assam but the province of education, a hermit kingdom walled off from the community of street magicians. The rickety guitar, with more snapped strings than intact, does not escape our repeated glances, eventually prompting Maqsud, another of Fariduddin's sons, to bashfully speak of his failed attempt at mastering the instrument.

"Can you play the guitar?"

"I can strum the strings a bit."

It seems surreal. The privilege of having a guitar with broken strings is too closely reminiscent of our own teenage misadventures, so much so that seeing it on the *field* uncontrollably draws us more into the lives of our *subjects*. The longer we stare at it, the graver our reservations with *value neutrality* become. Yet, we do stare at it, lest we end up exoticising Maqsud's experience. Perhaps the guitar demarcates boundaries in our minds that are keen on trapping him in the fixed category of *research objects*. In this high-headed researcher's dilemma, little does Maqsud's own predicament have any space. For him, the guitar is a token of failure; for us, it is the link that threatens to turn us, the supposed *observers*, into misplaced *inhabitants*.

Street magicians have been known to use drums to allure the attention of a crowd. The auditory environment of the performance demands bold sounds that can distinguish the magicians in the sonic clutter of urban-scapes. Acoustics, therefore, do not quite patch well with their act. Another prominent presence in the room is that of the photographs. Framed and assembled on the wall like a discoloured collage, they are of all sizes and in all conditions, some still immaculate though most suffer from a torn corner, an ungainly stain, or countless strokes of timeless scratches. There are photographs of Fariduddin performing abroad, him being received at airports and felicitated by awestricken hosts, but the dinginess of the shanty and Fariduddin's own humbleness subsumes all the fame on those walls. Yet, his humility and blitheness fail to belie his frustration, occasionally debilitating into desolation as our conversation progresses. He has tried bringing about a change here in India for him and his people but to no avail. Fariduddin considers himself an accomplished magician but a failed activist.

Fariduddin, like the rest of the inhabitants of that narrow, crowded lane, identifies as a Maseit—a conflation of different communities of street magicians, from the Poonawalas in Maharashtra to the

Dakhins in the South. They lead a semi-nomadic lifestyle, performing as they move from one place to another in those months of the year when travel becomes convenient. Fariduddin himself leads a fairly itinerant lifestyle, though travelling more as a stage performer nowadays than as a street magician. The arrival of summer sets in motion their transit to the hilly regions of North India. A fair draws Wajeed every summer to Himachal Pradesh and, likewise, the picturesque valleys of Kashmir prove to be too irresistible for Taufeeq and his family to not rush to Srinagar every June. Both Wajeed and Taufeeq are street magicians and Fariduddin's neighbours. The winter months are spent in Ludhiana, Chandigarh, Mumbai, and other cities in the plains where a living is to be earned out of their centuries-old tricks and illusions. But these magicians do not have to their names even an hour of professional training; they have learned the art from their elders, who in turn had inherited it from their elders, and so has the art been perpetuated in the community. The streets are their classroom; the sunlight their spotlights; the passers-by their audience; their home their backstage; their families, their assistants; and magic their lifestyle. In this scheme of things, reducing magic solely to a profession is an unspeakable disrespect for them. Their negotiation of street life is an intemporal journey into the core of the Maseit identity, allowing the magicians to assume a treasured history by depriving linearity to the homogenous, empty significations of capitalist time that conspire to rob their heritage of its eclectic mix of the modern and traditional, the global and local, and the has-been and to-come. Their art is but an enduring tradition that has been running in these families for so long that the only trace of its antiquity can be found in the words of its performers and the marvel of their performances.[3] Yet, the act that we witness happens here and now, right in the present confluence where the past melts into a unitary neoliberal future. As with everything that endures, it stops after a point. Things are changing, so much so that the very continuance of the art is at risk.

This very threat is what our research, in a nutshell, focuses on—that is, intergenerational mobility[4] among the street magicians of Kathputli Colony. Here, intergenerationality refers to the continuity of

[3] One of the first mentions of Indian street magic in the West was made in an 1890 article in the *Chicago Tribune*. The very provenance of the fictitious Great Indian Rope Trick, this article was rife with fabrications, as will be discussed in detail later.

[4] While using the term "intergenerational mobility", Giddens talks of two distinct interpretations. First, it may refer to a change in an individual's position in the socioeconomic ladder over the course of his or her working life, or as against the preceding generations. The second understanding of the concept, the meaning that is more relevant to

the art-form across generations of magicians in the Colony. About six decades ago, the Maseit had flocked from around the country, along with acrobats and puppeteers and other street performers, and settled in a place that later became famous by the name of Kathputli Colony. Today, the same Kathputli Colony, once renowned all over the world for its high concentration of street performers, stands in shambles.[5] The Colony has been demolished and its occupants shifted to a transit camp nearby in Faridpuri, Anand Parbat. The Maseit magicians, much akin to the rest of the street performers in the Colony, as Kazmin (1997) astutely writes, are a pit stop in the fragmented legacy of the art, stretched across ages and generations. The essay, accordingly, addresses the question of whether there is a disruption in the intergenerational continuity of street magic. The idea is to gain an insight into the poetics and politics of inheritance among the Maseit. In doing so, our attempt will be to investigate the various factors that construct their performance and illuminate the changing patterns of social organisation and cultural life in this community. In the end, we try exploring the attitude of the Maseit children towards street magic, probing the trepidatious notions of future and uncertainty in the community.

The research is set in Anand Parbat, Delhi, between September 2017 and March 2018. Our primary data has been collected through ethnographic interviews and a survey. Eight families of street magicians have been interviewed in depth, with each round consisting of a focus group comprising the performing members of the family and the children. The survey aids in obtaining quantifiable data, and so the questionnaire was designed majorly with close-ended questions. In total, we involve 35 respondents in the survey, all of them street magicians belonging to the Maseit community.

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this essay, evaluates whether one would take up the occupation of their elders. Although we eschew delving much into the former, a broad sense of the Maseit's socioeconomic conditions, and the changes therein, would persist throughout the piece. For more on intergenerational mobility, see Giddens (2009).

[5] The demolition of Kathputli Colony is a part of the Delhi Development Authority's (DDA) larger plan to revamp the entire Shadipur area. For this purpose, the DDA has partnered with the Mumbai-based Raheja builders. The first of its kind in Delhi, the project aims to construct a 15-storey building, where the now-displaced residents of the Colony will be allocated 2,800 dwelling units of 25 square metres each. In 2009, Raheja announced the construction of "Raheja Phoenix", a 54-storey skyscraper, also the first of its kind in the city. For more on the effects, politics, and technicalities of this massive project, see Banda, Vaidya, and Adler (2013) and Sikka (2014).

Traditionally, the Maseit have excluded women from their performance. Yet, their silence in street magic speaks glaringly of a performance-oriented political economy in the household. Their expulsion from the art rests on a history of repressed inclusions vital to the sustenance of street magic and its practitioners. Most evidently, without women, the supporting role of maintaining the magicians' costumes, making their petty paraphernalia, and facilitating their semi-nomadic movement would instantly collapse. An unmissable lacuna in this essay is a lack of discussion on gender. But this is a part of an ongoing project, and intergenerationality will be a launching pad to later delve into more nuanced aspects of the community's existence, including gender and patriarchy.

LETTERED AND JOBLESS: THE SHORTCOMINGS OF EDUCATION

Education supports mobility and such mobility is best metaphorised among the Maseit as a rope that might successfully pull them out of destitution by opening up several avenues for children to secure employment later in life.

"Magic is in one place, and education in another. We never got a chance to study, but our children must go to school. There is no doubt in that," Ashfaq, Fariduddin's brother, says solemnly.
"Then do you still want him to perform?" we ask.

There is a slight pause before Ashfaq answers, and we know that the problematisation of our research question has commenced.

We see education as a site of contestation. On the one hand, education fuels the Maseit's dreams for a better life. On the other, it increases the distance between the street magicians and their art by galvanising the lure of white-collar professions. Stuck in between is the future of the upcoming Maseit generation.

An impressionistic understanding of the nexus between education and the socioeconomic conditions of street magicians might suggest speedy upward mobility in the social hierarchy. The reality, however, departs significantly from this image of education as a liberator for the Maseit. It is, of course, a positive sign that all the children in the primary school-going age we encounter are enrolled in either of the government schools in the vicinity. This is precisely where deficiencies inherent in the Indian

public education system thwart further progress. Acquiring primary education may be possible for the Maseit children, but the access to secondary and tertiary education remains largely beyond their grasp. The ceiling renders the spoils of primary education rather pointless, for, at the end of the day, the job market does not have much on offer for someone schooled till the seventh or eighth grade and devoid of any specialised skills. At a more elementary level, ill-equipped public schools, with a quality of education notoriously below the mark set by private schools, disadvantage these kids right from the beginning. This system of unequal schooling impedes any uphill movement in the socioeconomic ladder, thus reproducing social inequality via the very sites that are supposed to capacitate the marginalised (Velaskar 1990). The child of a street magician might be educated way more than anyone ever has been in his family, yet the odds are in the favour of him ending up with no alternative means of livelihood, apart from that which his *forefathers* have been relying on for ages.

Fariduddin has provided his children with sound education. His daughter Yasmin has not only completed secondary education but also holds a bachelor's degree. His son Maqsud has passed high school. However, only his mother who periodically wipes the dust off his framed diploma acknowledges its worth; employers have mostly been dismissive of it. Unable to find a satisfactory job, Maqsud has taken to street magic. He performs not because he likes to but because he lacks any real options. Like Maqsud, a number of youths in the community, including his cousins, have embarked on this course and now find themselves irredeemably trapped. Once they start earning, their spending naturally increases, thereby binding them to their only source of earnings. Over a card trick that does not go particularly well on the first attempt, Maqsud tells us that he has recently bought a motorcycle and now must cater to its maintenance.

Maqsud errs when he pulls the first card from the deck. It is not the one we had chosen. Perhaps a dent to his hitherto jovial spirit would be counterproductive if we point out the mistake. On the contrary, maybe rectifying the error in time would save him from embarrassment in front of a less invested audience. That would be on the streets, but this is in his house. Then again, his art always has belonged in the streets. There, the audience might eagerly await results, while here we are cynically scanning through the process of the trick. There, he would be performing for himself, through his people, to earn a living; but here his community is performing through him, trying to legitimise its lifestyle before a set of vigilant eyes. Perhaps if we correct him, Maqsud would more expressively admit that street magic is not what he wants to do. But we cannot muster the heart to flay his half-

hearted triumph. So, we just stare at each other, while he makes another attempt, finally drawing the correct card.

Most street magicians never really had a choice in their lives other than taking up performance. Therefore, quite a few respondents seem baffled when ask what they had aspired to become in their childhood. For them, anything besides their traditional occupation is simply unfathomable. Even for those who did acquire some sort of education, their aspirations hardly materialised. We sense an unmistakable nostalgia for a past when these seasoned magicians were still children and when it was perfectly fine for them to yearn for a white-collar job, a respected position in the society. For instance, Asaduddin, Fariduddin's youngest brother, wanted to be a doctor when he was young. Fariduddin himself dreamt of becoming a pilot, settling on a doctor in the end. Such being the case, we see in most parents a desire to witness their kids becoming what they dreamt of or what they themselves never got a chance to become. Coming from the socioeconomic background that they do, they see in their children a shot at a better quality of life. The question of their art's survival, thus, takes a backseat when exposed to these pressing concerns and long-drawn desires. Those who still grapple with it, as will be illustrated later, either have grown indifferent to the performance—viewing it not so much as an art-form but as a means of livelihood—or have come to believe that street magic can survive independently of whether it is an occupation or not.

"IT RUNS IN THEIR BLOOD": TRADITION

In postcolonial India, Kathputli Colony is the site where the art of street magic has been nourished and passed on from one generation to the other. If magic is a living tradition of the Maseit's, then the Colony is where this life is embodied. The Colony is not just spatially relevant to the lives of the magicians but also serves as a sanctuary for them to interact and grow. Children, naturally, are also sucked into the processes and mores of this space. If nothing else, children are still expected to paddle the same wheels, learning the art irrespective of whatever they go on to do later in their lives. The environment a Maseit child is brought up in is conducive to learning the art. A father has a socialising effect on his children. A patriarch who thinks highly of his social status would imbue his children with a sense motivation to become high achievers in that field (Baker 1981). Hence, the kind of inspiration a child receives at home depends significantly on what the patriarch in the family makes of his social

status or, for that matter, that of his family as a whole.[6] As many as 62.85 per cent of the respondents in the survey, given the grim socioeconomic reality they confront, do not want their children to take up street magic. Keeping aside the indecisive 20 per cent, only 17.15 per cent wish to see their children continuing the traditional occupation. In the last category falls Ghishamuddin, another of Fariduddin's brothers, a man immensely proud of his art and his community's claim over it. He does little to conceal his smile, beaming with pride when his son pulls an egg out of the thin air, shoves it down his five-year-old assistant's throat, and finally collects it from his posterior as though he has laid it himself.

Another reason why children inevitably end up learning the art is again rooted in their socialisation. There does not appear to be any way for them to escape the consequences of an upbringing that finds in cultural production the predominant mode of sociality. As we gather from the interviews, children start accompanying their fathers to performances from ages as early as four. Being in such close proximity to street magic, it is very plausible that they will invariably learn something of the art. That being said, it is not necessary that the Maseit force their children into this line of work. Data from our survey rather lend themselves to the exact opposite. Taufeeq's case becomes pertinent here. He started taking his son with him as a *jummura*[7] from the age of four. Today, neither does he find anything respectable in this occupation nor is he much bothered by the decline of the art. Nonetheless, his son does know how to perform, though he does not want to perform either.

The ties of tradition, therefore, make up a crucial vector in introducing the art to children. The social and cultural setting that the Maseit live in—more on which is yet to come in the subsequent sections—

[6] Street magic, as shall be explained in detail later, is banned by law. Most of the magicians, therefore, have had to spend time in jail and, if not that, at least face police harassment. How this contumelious treatment meted out to the Maseit by law and the state diminishes their standing in the eyes of their children is an extension that we are currently working on as a larger venture to understand the impact of law on the art and culture of the community. For more on the history of this socialising effect, see Maccoby (1992).

[7] *Jummura* is the term used for the aide that accompanies a street performer. Not a prerogative of the Maseit, even the dancers employ jummuras in their acts. Though the Maseit generally make use of their kids, especially boys, and at times even girls when it is not possible to tell one apart from a boy, the term has primarily been perpetuated in popular culture by the performers who make monkeys dance—with the monkey being the jummura here.

contribute to the furtherance of communitarian values within the family. Whether they would actively practise and nourish the art, make a living out of it, or turn a Nelson's eye to it can only be answered by looking into other factors that constrain their choices.

AESTHETICS AND SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

For many a street magician, the performance is so closely rooted in their day-to-day living that both become inextricable from each other. Right from his childhood, a *madaari*[8] sees magic in and around his house; he watches his elders perform and is himself taken out to the streets as an aide; he travels around the country with his community to perform and earn; he seldom longs for an alternative career apart from becoming a street magician himself, and a street magician he inevitably ends up becoming. Therefore, it is no surprise that the aesthetic space a madaari operates in deeply permeates his social and cultural life. However, this relationship cannot be studied in terms of unidirectional flows alone, for as much as changing circumstances have forced the Maseit to constantly rejig their performance, the dynamics of their enactments have equally influenced the community's cultural, psychological, and social well-being. The Maseit have always arranged their lifeworld around the performance. Even when it comes to kinship, the tendency is to marry within the community, or, to be precise, within the conglomeration of communities that the Maseit are.

"So, you people have already met Fariduddin?" Hasheem asks us in a different stint of fieldwork.

We are at Ghaziabad, and episodes from our time in Anand Parbat a year ago lurk recursively in our minds like the humdrum of the ceiling fan attached to a rusting iron pole in Hasheem's tented accommodation. The memories are a bit muddled but, like his tent, they survive. After all, Hasheem and his family have lived under this canvas, at the same place, for 20years now!

"How come you know about it?" we are taken by surprise.

"Magic! I know things through magic."

[8] Literally meaning "the one who tames" or "the one who controls the minds of others", "*madaari*" is a blanket term used for tricksters, monkey and bear handlers, and, as is relevant here, street magicians.

We just uncomfortably smile, for if we have learnt anything about the community, the unpredictability of their skills is a constant surprise.

"Do not worry," Hasheem laughs, "he is my brother-in-law. I remember him telling me about a bunch of researchers last September."

We are still unconvinced. It is indeed a wonder that almost all our respondents happen to be related to each other, even when the field changes location. Magic seems more believable than such strict endogamy in a relatively small community.

Though changing times would instinctively suggest different and newer patterns of social organisation and cultural orientation, and that genuinely has been the case to a certain extent, the Maseit still continue to cling on steadfastly to their performance, letting their lives organically revolve around it. For instance, the stringent code of endogamy continues to be a potent norm despite the incursions of modernity and globalisation. The sense of collectivity is so strong that after their relocation to Anand Parbat, they petitioned the higher echelons of the DDA and Raheja Builders to get houses allocated in the same lane. The grooming of kids in the art also happens within the community, if not at the hands of parents then with the help of one *chacha* (uncle) or the other. Yasmin, Fariduddin's daughter, did not learn the art from her father the way her brothers did. To become one of the first women among the Maseit to master the art and indulge in it professionally—though very briefly—Yasmin had to work as an apprentice with Fariduddin's brother Asaduddin, accompanying him to streets or to stages as need arose. Even when the Maseit set out for other cities, they coordinate the journey among themselves. It would be making a bit more than is due of the community's hold if we imply that the madaaris have no agency over their performance, for that is not at all the case. The community interferes minimally with the art, but individual magicians often count on the collectivity to consolidate their performance in hostile city-spaces. A couple of families tag along together, tot their luggage and paraphernalia on mules (now in buses), and set out for a place that they have been frequenting for a considerable number of years. The community is intrinsic to their spatial movements, but new travel routes and deviant itineraries are not necessarily detested. Whatever they manage to earn from a performance, earlier grains and now cash in fast-dwindling sums, the magicians divide it among the families engaged in the act. Simply put, where they live, whom they perform with, where they go and

with whom, and what they make out of it, everything is grounded in the community, which in turn is organised along the lines of their performance. How has the performance then interacted with the various facets of their precarious lives? The answer explains some of the significant changes that have occurred in the aesthetic and performative sphere of street magic over the years. Through this, we contemplate what all these shifts mean for the upcoming generation.

Street performance, like folk art, has a deep-seated ritualistic composition (Kepchan 1995). The affective impetus and narrative tools are profoundly ingrained in the community-based organisation of street performers. While some parts of their performance—like where to perform and with whom—are casually deliberated within the community, others come to be of great intimate value to the individual performer. For a madaari, there is a tremendous emotional factor attached to the tricks he performs and popularises as his specialties. It might be the Great Indian Rope Trick as is with Fariduddin or the Indian Flying Man Trick that Hasheem is renowned to be adroit in. These tricks have become a medium of cultural expression for the Maseit. From the paraphernalia used to the kind of crowd and setting the magician prefers, all these are minute aspects of a madaari's performance, very strongly embedded in his psychological conditioning. The struggle then is to concile the traits of the Maseit's performance with the demands of popular culture. While some have outright refused to even perform under lights, other have gradually begun to see the benefits of stage performance. More remarkably, the very nature and make of the paraphernalia have changed. Earlier the Maseit used to start their performance with a snake—very much living and very much real. Nowadays, the living snake has been replaced by rubber toys. Haider's father used to own a python till as recently as fifteen years ago, until he succumbed to the demands of wildlife activists and the forest department, eventually releasing Haider's beloved pet into the wild. With the last of the snakes, the community also parted with the livelier facets of their performance. This time, they let it lose while navigating concrete jungles and resisting the onslaught of neoliberal media.

"We used to feed it [the python] daily. Now we can barely manage ourselves," Haider regretfully remarks.

Usmaan and his vehement opposition to changes in the traditional way of performance is an illustration of resurgent pride and glory. Over a sleight of hand with coins, he makes his aversion to stage performance known to us.

"Real magic," he says, "is that which is performed under natural light with a crowd at a hand's distance or two,[9] not with props and retakes and artificial lighting."

For him, his crude tricks invoke a sense of cultural pride that is often played down by the masses with their fanfare for celebrity magicians. Yet, more than rivalry, what perturbs Usmaan the most is the worry that unless they firmly hold on to the way they have traditionally been performing, there would exist no difference between a madaari magician and any random stage performer. He believes that his children would learn magic through what "flows in their blood" and what circulates within his family as its legacy. Very optimistic about a generation that would still preserve the art to some degree, Usmaan is no less bothered about the diminishing numbers than any, albeit his concern regarding changing trends singularly stands out. He is anxious that the glory his ancestors have amassed over the ages would be lost in the grandeur of the stage and the glare of artificial lights projecting myriad shades and hues. However, his brother Farukh, sitting sheepishly beside him, remarks diffidently that he does not mind performing on the stage. Nor does he mind the money he makes out of it. He circumspectly adds that he performs in events and parties and that he would not mind trying out street performance, if allowed to, every once in a while. But regardless of their respective takes on magic as it happens in popular culture today, both Usmaan and Farukh speak nostalgically about the past, a feeling that resonates palpably throughout the ethnographic interviews.

The move towards stage performance is one of the many changes that the Maseit have embraced so as to cater to the globalised neoliberal appetite. The aesthetic space of street magic as a whole has undergone multiple changes over the years—some externally foisted, some gladly welcomed by the magicians themselves. Though a great many have begun taking to stage performance, most choose to combine street performance with stints on the stage, even merging the features of the two categories in their act. The reason behind this is not only that the stage is where the audience is but also because the streets are where law keeps vigil. Street magic is considered begging and thus is illegal in the eyes of law. A good many magicians insinuate in the interviews, and an equal number of them admit candidly, that bribes happen to be the order of the day. A quid pro quo situation where they pay off the police in exchange for about fifteen to twenty minutes is all that the Maseit get to arrange their

[9] Although the actual distance between the madaari and his audience happens to be at least five feet.

paraphernalia, gather a crowd, perform, and then wrap up by collecting whatever the audience might wish to reward them with. As a result, elaborate tricks are no more performed. Gone are the days when the Maseit would perform in peace for close to an hour-and–a-half, pull out a boy from an empty basket, hold a man afloat in the thin air, and the like. Nowadays, as we observe with the relatively younger performers such as Farukh and Wajeed, the usual sleight of hand—nothing too elaborate, nothing too captivating, the kind that is performed by most magicians on television—dominates the Maseit's performance.

Time constraints have also taken a toll on dialogue delivery. Earlier, during their hour-long performances, dialogue used to play an indispensable role in keeping the crowd amused and entertained. But there is very little that can be said and done in fifteen minutes, and so the dialogue delivery has also been reduced from complementing their performance—as a way of setting an exuberant aura about their act—to simply communicating with the audience whenever the need cannot be dispensed with. Aficionados like Fariduddin, Ghishamuddin and Taufeeq have managed to retain their command over communication with their robust and enchanting modulation, as opposed to the younger lot whose monotonous speech flounders to entertain us.

Given all these obstacles, the only way for the Maseit to put up with the restrictions and yet preserve their traditional art—which for many is the only source of livelihood—is to explore newer avenues to express it. But the moment street magic is transplanted onto the stage, the traits that set the madaari apart from his modern-day counterpart on television start getting clouded. Not hard to imagine, artificial lights take over natural lighting; the small, rugged sack containing all that the madaari could possibly require for his performance gives way to an extensive array of costumes and props; the dialogue delivery changes; the robustness in his voice that had captivated countless crowds becomes redundant before the microphone. Onstage, there is little traction that a sleight of hand can generate, and so the madaari for once gets to cut a man into half, make him fly, disappear, and whatnot. Essentially, he gets to perform those tricks which he never can on the streets. But the road to the stage is marked by cut-throat competition and is hospitable to only a select few.

As Fayez says, "I will love to perform on stage, only if I ever get to."

Yet, notwithstanding all the hardship, the madaari continues to cope, creating tricks if he must and forsaking some if the circumstances call for it. Back in the day, when Fariduddin had started performing, there was tangible excitement for the Great Indian Rope Trick. But the trick that had fascinated so many around the world, sported frequently as the cover image of an exotic orient that did not so much exist in the subcontinent as it did in the West's imagination, was an ingenious hoax (Trey 2011). Perpetuated for the first time by an 1890 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, the trick became an enduring myth attributed to Indian street magicians. On the contrary, the purportedly ancient trick was a much recent invention. Charming a rope like a snake and then stiffening it enough for a boy to climb all the way to its top: this routine was created by the orientalist discourse through mutated history. When Fariduddin asked his elders about it, he was ensured that no one in their community had performed such a feat for the last 600 years.

"Our elders had no idea about it. For the last 600 years, the trick had been never performed."

"Then what created the buzz around it?"

"The *foreigners*, they did. The *Angrez* [English] looted us, but they could not take away our culture."

Of course, this is too serious a claim to make without backing, so he immediately opens a scene from an old Bollywood movie on his laptop. The actor, no other than Amitabh Bachchan, portraying a bandit donning an oversized, rickety black robe, appears to be schooling a British woman about the depredations of colonial rule. Suddenly, his emotionally charged voice rips through the imperial mischaracterisation of certain communities as criminal tribes. Fariduddin simply wanted to foreground the rant on culture. But in passing, he perspicaciously makes a statement on the colonial understanding of criminality by birth, the category of communities socialised into habitual delinquency; that is, the so-called criminal tribes (see generally Nigam [1990] and Singha [1993]). Though there is no evidence or perception among the Maseit that they were ever notified as a criminal tribe, the state machinery in independent India seems intent on revoking that historical freedom. The postcolonial state and its civil society elites have indelibly stigmatised the community as a class of innate criminals.

Taking his elders' words for granted, Fariduddin grew so motivated by the enthusiasm around this figment of imagination that he worked for six years and invented the trick from scratch. Today, apart

from making the rope rise a good number of feet into the air, the spectacular act has propelled his prominence much higher.

All these changes in the traditional aesthetics and performance have struck different chords with children and the youth in the community. While 20 per cent of the respondents in our quantitative interview are positive that children would come to appreciate this art-form since "it runs in their blood", those from the upcoming generation whom we talked to present a slightly more nuanced narrative. On the one hand there is Sameer, Ghishamuddin's son, a seventh grader who performs for the sheer delight of it. Magic, in his understanding, boosts his popularity among his peers. But on the other hand, there is Kazim and his brother Taqdeer. Both are unemployed but are so disgusted by the idea of ever performing on the streets, attracting only apathy and law's scorn, that they rather prefer to squander their days idly. Kazim, however, regularly goes to the gym and desires to make it big as a bodybuilder.

THE RACE THAT TELEVISON WON: APATHY TOWARDS STREET MAGIC

In current times, the audience's perspective of street magic has degraded swiftly to that of apathy. In this section, we examine the possible ripples that the advent of mass media might have generated across the Maseit community and street magic. We are cautious of drawing a neat relationship here between the growth of mass media and the demise of street magic, but the severe impact of television does merit a separate discussion of its own. Earlier, when television broadcasts were not yet as commonplace as they are today, street magic was one of the rare sources of entertainment for the masses. Street performance, hence, brought sufficient income for the Maseit's sustenance. The coming of television has contrived a change in the patterns of consumption and in the forms of entertainment that the public demands (Newcomb 2005). In India, a decline in street performance as a viable type of entertainment was observed by late 1980s. Televised programmes provided exposure to motion pictures. Newer content was readily made available in living rooms, behind the windows of electronic shops, restaurants—practically, places that the Maseit could barely venture into (Sabbafh 1982). The televised content that the audience has become accustomed to is drastically different from street magic. Television has variety, while the standard charts of the Maseit, apart from the specialties, are similar across the board. Television shows, with all the rehearsal, direction, camera tricks, and post-production work, have a sanitised appeal, while street magic is characteristically known for its raw and

natural touch. The Maseit have failed to keep up with television in the race. Concurrently, a shift has occurred in the audiences' preferences. Television has come out as the winner in that race.

The performers, despite being lauded worldwide for their skills, do not receive the same recognition in India. Fariduddin Khan, with his performance of the Great Indian Rope Trick, has gained immense appreciation in several European and Asian countries. However, he fails to trigger the same amount of applause in India. His tricks are identified disparagingly as a way of soliciting alms. As noted, street magicians are viewed as mere beggars and treated with contempt by the masses and law alike. This apathetic reception of the performers has led to gradual disenchantment among the Maseit insofar as them making a conscious effort to take the art forward is concerned. A sense of futility seems to be building up; some of the Maseit have begun thinking that continuing the art that has shaped their identity and livelihood for ages would be in vain. This is evident as 51.42 per cent of our sample of 35respondents have not even bothered to teach the art to at least one child, while 31.42 per cent have taught it to only two or less. They believe that alternative sources of livelihood would be more feasible as street magic does not provide for the demands of the masses anymore. More importantly, it seems that today's viewers do not provide the kind of attention and recognition these artists rightly seek and merit.

This, however, does not mean that street magicians have given up on the art. Although indifference from the masses has disillusioned most street magicians, several still cling on to some optimism. Magicians like Usmaan, Asaduddin, and Mushtaq—Fariduddin's brother-in-law—believe that although street magicians may not be taken seriously in the country, they still garner affection from people; as they say, 'One may not be overtly respected at home and yet be doted on.' Such idiomatic consolation provides them with a ray of hope to continue with their performance. Nevertheless, one must not confuse their optimism as being a denial of the reality. The numbers are dwindling, the audience is shrinking, and the youth are shying away from the art. So worrisome is the future that none of them refuses to acknowledge its dangers.

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK: CONCERTED EFFORTS

That street magic has declined both in numbers and popularity goes without a doubt. However, some performers, within and without the community, are persistent in ensuring the survival of the art and

have put in consolidated efforts to preserve it. But these developments have always fallen short of fruition. Although they have set a noteworthy precedent, there is a lot to be desired in terms of building an enterprising community of street magicians that is conscious of its grievances and willing to toil for its redemption.

All the steps taken in this regard till date, one way or the other, have been aimed at breaking away from the traditional mode of inheritance within the family and propagating the art in untapped spheres. Magicians like Ghishamuddin teach magic in schools, gathering a learner base beyond the lineages within which the art has passed batons historically. He is also trying to begin a joint venture with a group of students from Delhi University, whereby he would perform in colleges with the intention of raising awareness. Similarly, Fariduddin and Yasmin plan on setting up a school where formal education and performance, from acrobatics to magic, would go hand in hand. Such cross-cultural propagation of the art moulds it malleably to fit the needs of popular culture. Although we cannot yet definitively determine if the children who attend Ghishamuddin's workshops or those who will be enrolled in Fariduddin's school are better poised to inherit the art than the Maseit children, it is certain that they would have greater independence to experiment with magic. Since they are vastly detached from the social and cultural weft that the Maseit children come from, they must intrinsically speak their own language, incorporate their own bodily vocabulary, and make their own selection of tricks while performing. While there is a code that that Sameer, Maqsud, and Yasmin would be expected to follow during the performance, tweaking the art is mere experimentation for Ghishamuddin's students.

The establishment of a non-government organisation (NGO) called Indian Street Performers Association Trust (ISPAT) in 2013 by Fariduddin Khan was an instrumental step towards the amelioration of the street magicians' woes. The aim of the organisation was to revive traditional street performances—such as street magic, acrobatics, singing, snake charming, so on—and to subvert the protracted derision that the performers have received from the state and the public. His organisation has been pivotal not just in popularising the art by raising awareness but also in liaising with the government and unequivocally championing the issues of subaltern artists. The NGO works with governmental authorities to designate areas where street performance can be done without infringing the law or fearing arrests. ISPAT conducts training programmes for magicians in order to help them acquire new skills apt for modern audiences.

But the bane of all these initiatives is the same old issue of damp enthusiasm and scanty contribution from the community. At present, ISPAT is suffering from a scarcity of resources—both in terms of finances and participation. In his own words, one of Fariduddin's gravest failures has been the inability to mobilise the youth. The instability of income in street magic has unleashed a decline in the number of people willing to associate with the NGO. Yet, the underlying story might be a bit more complex. While catching a word with us between the interviews, Fariduddin's wife says that though men would hate to admit it, the reason why the community has responded so feebly is internal jealousy. They feel as though people like Fariduddin are raising their voices just for personal benefits, and the relatively greater fame that he has amassed does not counter this perception either. All this while, Fariduddin's second daughter, Sabrina, keeps nodding reticently in agreement. ISPAT is perhaps the pioneer in standing up for the Maseit and advocating their cause. The route to its demise has created a vacuum, with no sign of any fresh undertakings to fill that void. Today, the decaying NGO is seeing the end of its twilight, bracing for a moonless night, so to speak.

THE ACT, STIGMA, AND ANOTHER ACT: CHANGES IN THE STATUS QUO

The final factor, within the scope of this research, that may notably influence the intergenerational bequest of the Maseit's art are prospective changes in the status quo. A pressing problem for the Maseit are the provisions of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959,[10] also known as the Bombay Beggary Act. Applicable in Delhi as well, this Act criminalises the act of begging, which is what, unfortunately, law deigns to make of street magic. But more than sanctioning a blanket ban on street magic, the Act has imprisoned the Maseit in a legal cage; within a reified discourse of semantic closures , it has forced the performers to manoeuver through a juridical framework to make sense of their performance and their lives. Quite a few magicians recall that in the 1970s, they could perform in Connaught Place at the cost of small bribes. However, that option has vanished today, with the authorities clamping down harder on them, denying these magicians a performance on the streets due to reasons as far-fetched as the fear of possible "bomb blasts". This does not mean that the uptight police have begun enforcing the ban strictly; their impeded access to upscale neighbourhoods simply

[10] In the August 2018 case of *Harsh Mander & Anr v. Union of India* (AIR 2018 Del 188), the Delhi High Court has decriminalised begging, striking down several provisions of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959 for being unconstitutional. What it means in effect for the Maseit is, however, yet to be gauged.

means that the Maseit must nowadays spend more in bribes and plead with the authorities even more flatteringly, only to be allowed to perform in the suburbs and low-key localities. A possible solution can be the Persons in Destitution Model Bill, 2016, which has provisions decriminalising the Maseit's presence in the public sphere. But how much of the damage that the Bombay Beggary Act has caused can the Persons in Destitution Model Bill undo?

First, there is the issue of awareness. Awareness among the Maseit is so inadequate that the number of people who have heard of the Bombay Beggary Act can be counted on the fingers of one hand. To this end, there will have to be a massive awareness-raising campaign to percolate knowledge about the Persons in Destitution Model Bill once it is passed; for that matter, a larger drive to apprise the community about the legal obstacles they face on a day-to-day basis is needed. Even if that is achieved, scars from the past would be tough to heal. Many report that the police would not only stop them from performing but would also arrest and rough them up. Even children are not spared: They get branded as child labourers. Therefore, while the street magicians may not know the law itself, they have certainly experienced enough to know what it feels like to have it relentlessly frown upon you. This chilling effect, this sense of fear that has become a part and parcel of their performance, cannot simply be soothed by enacting a new legislation.

But there surely is some will and enthusiasm at the Maseit's end. When we ask if they would like to bring their art back out on the streets, most answer positively, expressing an earnest desire, enshrouded by the exigencies of their tough lives, to see their children performing out in the open. But the Persons in Destitution Model Bill could well be too little, too late, for the damage has been inflicted nigh irredeemably. In addition to declining popularity, which no amount of legislation can help soar, mere legal changes cannot erase the stigma attached to these magicians. The Bombay Beggary Act, as Ramanathan (2008) illustrates, labels the Maseit as "ostensibly poor". By calling them "status offenders", the Act implies that these people perform for the sake of begging and that the act of begging itself is done to masquerade their true socioeconomic status. In simpler words, the law says that the Maseit pretend to be poor to be able to beg and that they do so under the disguise of being performers. Such stigmas that stem from legal misconceptions, which then posit the Maseit at a more pathetic situation than the lower rungs of the society that they already occupy, cannot just be effaced by the enactment of one more legislation, or, for that matter, any number of legislations.

The second major change in the prevailing circumstances is the relocation of the street magicians from Kathputli Colony to the transit camp in Anand Parbat, Delhi. When they were shifted to the camp, they were assured adequate housing within two years. Four years have elapsed and the magicians are still waiting for the authorities to make good on their promise. The tiny, dilapidated shanties in the transit camp, with one bathroom at the end of each lane for everyone, hardly qualify as appropriate conditions for human habitation. Furthermore, back in Kathputli Colony, their status as artists was still intact. Here, they have been clubbed together with other slum dwellers. In the transit camp, the Maseit are sucked into a homogenous group of residual populations that must be managed, governed, regulated, and perhaps even rehabilitated, but one that is never afforded the privilege of living without the token of death and deprivation.

The relocation has also spatially separated the Maseit. A few have been allotted flats in Narela, Haryana—a place situated at enough distance from Kathputli Colony to further erode the community's already crumbling social ties. Though the relocation may not affect their performance per se, it has taken a visible toll in terms of reduced feasibility in performing. Moving out of the Colony, at best, has had an indirect impact on the pragmatics of the art, in that it does not remain as practical as it was earlier to perform frequently. Transportation has emerged as a serious obstacle; given that the terrain on which the camp is set is rife with steep inclines, e-rickshaws and auto-rickshaws often refuse to traverse the distance. All in all, while the relocation features as a temporary impediment that is not likely to be resolved anytime soon, the Persons in Destitution Model Bill, albeit a significant change in the offing, cannot substantially alter the hegemony of the status quo. The enduring scars of legal violence and the social attitudes of an elite civil society that has readily rubbed salt on these experiential wounds are too unyielding to mend the structural suppression of the Maseit's art-form.

CONCLUSION: THE BEGINNING OF THE END OR A NEW BEGINNING?

If we go by simple statistics, the fact that the art would not sustain for another generation is apparent: a whopping 65.71 per cent of our respondents would concur. However, a more analytically honest understanding of the circumstances paints a different picture altogether. As established through the ethnographic interviews, it is conscionable to believe that the art would not be lost by the end of this generation or the next. The population of street performers would diminish further in the coming

years, but the factors identified previously will still retain quite a few in the profession. Probably not sizeable anymore, but the strength of street magicians will not be extirpated entirely.

There is only so much that education as an emancipator can accomplish. The flaws immanent in the Indian public education system will produce a generation of street magicians educated for the first time in the history of their community but still not prepared enough to succeed in the job market. The education that these children can hope to acquire, like its quality, is limited and insufficient. In sum, education can better be seen as a reproducer of the socioeconomic barriers that the Maseit are confined in.

While education is pertinent in evaluating the intergenerational continuity of street magic, primarily in the occupational sphere, the role of tradition sheds light on the patterns of inheritance in the community. For ages, the art has been propagated through the family and the community. The Maseit still continue to organise themselves socially and culturally along the tracks laid down by their performance. The art, therefore, becomes an important part of the upbringing and socialisation of children. The way one picks up the language that their parents speak at home, the Maseit children too learn the art as they grow up. This is not to deny the existence of exceptions, but that the art can survive even without its occupational role has been amply illustrated here.

There is also the whip of law that the street magicians have long been lashed with. Even though legislative changes are in the horizon, the effectiveness of such half-baked measures, declining popularity, and a host of other societal and perceptual harms raise serious doubts. We may have identified law as a contributing factor in the disruption of intergenerational continuity, but one must be cautious to note that the ambit of our research does not surpass this causal link. It does not gauge law's effect on the performance, and the cultural and social life of the Maseit within legal categories. Nor does the research aim to historically map how the Maseit have subverted their juridico-legal banishment and interacted with the legal framework to redefine their performative lives. However, the vice versa—that is, impressing upon the government the need for urgent legal changes and to highlight the ramifications of the state's indifference towards their plight—has indeed been attempted by the scarce and largely unsuccessful concerted efforts within the community. Nonetheless, comprehensive insights into how law has impacted the culture, social life, and performance of the

Maseit, and how the community has responded to these legal developments can be envisioned as an extension to this essay.

So, what is the conclusive status of the disruption in intergenerationality? On the one hand, there is the saddening picture of the present: dwindling numbers, apathy, insensitive law, frustration and indifference within the community itself. On the other hand, there are currents that have traditionally cascaded the art and continue to do so. Balancing these two sides, one can arrive at the conclusion, as we have, that the number of street performers is indeed plummeting and that there is a visible disruption in intergenerationality—a trend that will only worsen in the coming times. This compels one to ask something that we have asked ourselves throughout our research: What does magic mean to the Maseit? It surely is not just a livelihood. A livelihood does not emphatically invoke community ethos, it does not problematise patterns of inheritance. Nor does it "run in blood" or break down community ties. For the Maseit, magic is a life course—be it street magic or its rendition performed onstage. It constitutes the kernel of their Maseit identity. Therefore, in our study of the relationship between magic and culture, magic and the Maseit's social life, neither does magic figure as a mythic escape from existential conundrums, nor is it reduced to a prosaic act of everyday routine. Magic stages the event that births the Maseit out of their daily regimen. It operationalises an awesome spectacle of otherworldliness into an ordinary articulation of the community's identity. The Maseit's magic is a recursive praxis that singularly enacts a drama of dignity and dispossession, pride and prejudice every time it is performed. Such a firm position of magic in the Maseit's socio-cultural cosmos suffices to say that the art would not be expunged altogether, not at least in this generation, probably not even in the next. But the abysmally dark path ahead for the Maseit is a concern. With the onslaught of changes that the Maseit are compelled to reckon with, who knows, the kind of street magic we are writing about might well end up remaining only in dogeared memoirs and research papers.

Devangna Singh, Dikshit Sarma Bhagabati, Ishan Vijay, and Malini Chidambaram are fourth-year law students at Jindal Global Law School, OP Jindal Global University. This research was undertaken during the first and second years of their study. Parts of this essay were written as early as in September 2017, initiating a reflexive process of ethnographic (re)writing and (re)conceptualisation that persisted for three-and-a-half years till the final edits were made in February 2021.

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SUB\versions
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The Story of Fluke

An Examination of English Theatre as "Class Culture" in Chennai

Nayantara Nayar

ABSTRACT

The paper asks the question "What is English theatre?" with specific reference to theatre happening in Chennai these last sixty years. The researcher's interrogation of this cultural practice stemmed from her involvement in this practice and curiosity about whether certain trends she noticed during her time as a performer and director—those of professionalisation and financialisation—would lead to actual growth and self-sufficiency within the community. By using data collected via interviews with various members of the theatre community in Chennai, the author seeks to complicate the understanding of where the tradition of English theatre comes from and also question the nature of the discourse that surrounds it.

KEYWORDS

theatre, English theatre, Chennai, Madras, upper-middle class, neoliberalism, class cultures

When I was a student completing my graduation in media and cultural studies in Mumbai, the need to find a research topic for my thesis arose. Many topics were explored, but eventually, my mind wandered to theatre, in which I had participated for two years during and right after my undergraduate degree in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. This mostly consisted of proscenium theatre performed in English. However, it was not the plays I was interested in studying, but the culture that allowed English theatre (ET) to come into being and continue to exist as a cultural product in Chennai. The research I undertook used a mixed methodology that was distinctively qualitative: a combination of interviews[1] I had conducted with 14 people (a mixture of theatre practitioners, aficionados, and festival organisers); and time spent as a flâneuse moving through the city and my

own experiences of this theatre. My methodology could be described as "autobiographical ethnography" or "auto-ethnography". It combined the autobiographical writing, where "an author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences", and the ethnographic style, where researchers "study a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping *insiders* (cultural members) and *outsiders* (cultural strangers) better understand the culture (MASO, 2001)" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). This particular methodology allowed me to collect and organise information about ET, the city of Chennai, and the cultural practices of the upper-middle class. In this paper, I would like to look specifically at what ET is, the people who prastice it, and why it is practised. I hope to paint a picture of ET in Chennai that, even if not holistic, provides an adequate introduction that can be used as a foundation for future research.

AREA OF STUDY

The ET complicates the very task of defining what "modern" Indian theatre is. In her book *Theatres of Independence,* Aparna Dharwadker defines and classifies "modern, Indian" theatre by writing:

> To a significant extent, the historical origins of this evolving tradition of texts and performance practices lie in the genres, discourses, and institutions of theatrical modernity that emerged under European influence in such colonial cities as Calcutta and Bombay during the second half of the nineteenth century. But to an equally significant degree, practitioners of the new drama have forged a reactive cultural identity for themselves by disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other precolonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization. (Dharwadker 2005: 2)

Dharwadker assumes that the post-Independence "modern" nation-state is removed from its colonial contexts. She does acknowledge the influence of colonial rule on theatre in large urban spaces, but her assumption that Indian theatre *is* this "new" drama and that its practitioners wish to cast off the mantle of colonial influence to achieve "effective decolonisation" is problematic. Feminist theatre practitioner A. Mangai expresses a similar discomfort with academic work done around post-Independence theatre in general and with Dharwadker's work in specific. Mangai points out that academic work on modern theatre tends to concentrate on "the relationship between the colonial and post-colonial, in other words with the 'nation-modern' being brought in

to counter colonial categories." (2015: 19) She further states that "nation-modern" is such a loaded term because modernity and all that it promised was by no means "a bloodless process or even a complete one" (Mangai 2015: 18). ET is an excellent example of how true that is.

It certainly throws a wrench in the reclamation of "classical and other precolonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization" (Dharwadker 2005: 2). The ET done in Chennai does engage with classical Indian forms and stories, but a sizable portion of the cultural products follow staging and production guidelines that were put in place by Western proscenium theatre. I do not claim that colonial theatrical forms continue to exist unchanged in Chennai, but neither does the "modern Indian" theatre of Dahrwadker. Classification is always a matter of degrees. As one interviewee put it when asked what ET was,

> We try to compartmentalise things and it's very difficult to box things. And at every level of analysis, the criteria for what takes precedence changes ... number one it's a language. Now within the language, I say "What is ET?", and then it's what is outside the country. So Girsh Karnad translated into English is not as English as Shakespeare or Sarah Kane or Carrie Churchill or a translated version of Daniel Defoe. So it changes at every level. (Interviewee Seven 2015)

What this implies in the context of research methodologies is that classification is prone to leaving gaps. Arjun Appadurai (1988: 36) makes an interesting argument about the genealogies of hierarchy within anthropology, stating that "hierarchy is one of an anthropology of images within and through which anthropologists have frozen the contributions of specific cultures to our own understanding of the human condition."[2] Such a freezing process is easily transferred to other disciplines with the social sciences. After all, what determines the research areas we choose? More often than we realise, they are determined by what has already been studied.

When I first proposed wanting to study this particular class culture, the research area was thought to be too insulated, too self-contained to be worth the effort. "Nothing" was going on, so why write about it? Additionally, no academic work existed around ET in Chennai at the time of my research. Even when I did manage to get some primary information through the interviews, interviewees themselves insisted that the lack of impact ET made, disqualified it as a worthwhile area of study. Admittedly, ET in Chennai does not, at first glance, have an impact of any significance. But on closer inspection, that is not quite true: With over twenty theatre groups that

work in English, Chennai boasts an active amateur and professional theatre scene. In the months of August, September, and October, two large festivals take place: One is the MetroPlus Theatre Festival (now The Hindu Theatre Festival) organised by *The Hindu*, which is devoted solely to theatrical performances, and the other is the Park's New Festival organised by the Times group, which hosts a number of cultural events including plays. In June–July, "Short n' Sweet", a competition of ten-minute plays, used to take place in Chennai. These are just the better-known events; half-a-dozen smaller theatre festivals are organised and conducted throughout the year. In addition to this, there are plays performed throughout the year by various groups and amateur college theatre clubs. Theatre workshops and classes in schools and even for adults and corporate partners take place. Relative to the population of Chennai, the ET community is tiny, but considering that Chennai's estimated population is eight million people, the numbers are not insignificant.

We are then presented with the possibility that there is a second reason that ET is thought of as an unworthy research area. The ET in Chennai is very much a cultural practice that belongs to a particular segment of the middle class: the upper-middle class. As such, the class cultures of the middle class are identified first and foremost as cultures of consumption. As Bourdieu (1984: 2) suggests, "Consumption is ... a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code." Bourdieu is mounting a defence of the "reading of art", but his point could be extended to make a similar case for all kinds of consumption. The extension of the argument does not justify or grant legitimacy to the act of consumption itself but instead allows us to consider various kinds of consumption within their specific contexts and then decide what sort of communications are taking place. Then, the cultures of the upper-middle class are never *just* cultures of consumption. They are complex, with ... myriad forms of competing cultural capital, its ambiguous and anxiety-inducing relationship with the capitalist market, its intricate systems of dissimulation (whereby it hides its class privilege in everyday practice)—along with its increasingly dominant role in cultural process worldwide, that makes it an important and timely subject of anthropological inquiry. (Liechty 2006: 10–11)

THE FLUKE

I usually began my interviews by asking, "So what was your first experience with theatre?" Consider this selection of answers:

> Oh it started in school, *just randomly* a friend and I wrote a script and did for a school function. It was a great way to beat the boredom of school... College theatre was different. It started off as something I wanted to do in my free time and it became something I had to do all the time because I was so passionate about it. (Interviewee Seven 2015; emphasis mine)

> In school where I had *very randomly been picked* by my teacher to come in for an English play for the Annual Day. My school has a tendency to go a little grand with their plays and they call in professionals from across the board to train us too. Later I did a play called *Ravanan* in which I played Hanuman … that was my first taste of theatre. (Interviewee Three 2015; emphasis mine)

> I got into it very late—I always had a love of theatre and I grew up in the Kalakshetra and dance drama is theatre, it has all the elements of a spoken drama. I've grown up seeing it- I've been a theatre critic across India and seen lots of festivals abroad also, I've always been interested in theatre, but I never thought of taking it up as a profession. *It was a fluke.* I was writing something and an actor friend—I just wrote it as a dialogue—he read it and said, "When are the rehearsals starting?" That's when I realised it had possibilities as a play. (Interviewee Four 2015; emphasis mine)

This idea that their respective entries into theatre were "flukes" or "random" is a common one amongst the people that take part in ET in Chennai. My own story followed a similar tune: There was a chance encounter, an unlikely partnership, a play produced on both whim and prayer. There is an almost mythic quality to the story, and indeed, when Joseph Campbell talks about the myth and the story of the hero's journey, he speaks specifically about the place of the "blunder", stating that:

> A blunder—apparently the merest chance—reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood. As Freud has shown, blunders are not the merest chance. They are the result of suppressed desires and conflicts. They are ripples on the surface of life, produced by unsuspected springs. And these may be very deep—as deep as the soul itself. The blunder may amount to the opening of a destiny. (Campbell 2012: 46).

It is neither a deep-seated desire nor destiny that interests us—that is to say, it is not the fluke-like nature of that first experience that is interesting: It is how this "story of the fluke" is an integral part of the interviewees' stories of theatrical origin. The story of fluke provides us with an insight into the discourse around ET cultures in Chennai. Practitioners have the urge to establish the "randomness" of the occurrence, which in turn indicates them being swept up by something elusive and *grand*: a grand tradition that is both the tradition of "theatre" as a whole, and the tradition of ET in Chennai. But just where does this idea of "tradition of ET" even come from?

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF ENGLISH THEATRE

While some Western theatre was being performed in the Pantheon[3] (now the Madras[4] Museum Theatre) during the early 1800s, local folk and street theatre performances were certainly more popular. According to M.S.S. Pandian, in the late 1890s, another form of theatre called company drama also grew popular. Company drama was one kind of Tamil theatre performed mostly in urban spaces (as opposed to *therukoothu*, or traditional Tamil performances, which was usually performed in villages). These plays traversed the urban–rural divide regularly:

> The repertoire of these companies was limited to a few mythologicals, written as musicals. The stories were standardised in a series of songs. The playwright, in these companies, called "vathiyar" (teacher), wrote the songs, composed the music and also directed the plays. All the actors had to be singers, including the clown. And there was the pit orchestra, with a harmonium and a tabla. The emphasis was on singing, not on drama. (cited in Pandian 2014)

However, company dramas like therukoothu were looked down upon by "elites". A "modern" Indian theatre on a proscenium stage, with props, lighting, music, and sets—essentially a theatrical production much closer to what we see today in ET in Chennai—was available to non-elite audiences only towards the end of the 1800s with the coming of the travelling Parsi theatre.

These travelling troupes offered something wholly different to Madras audiences. Their scripts, while having Indian mythologies, also often adapted Western narratives and added very different kinds of music and dance. Even if they were using Indian mythological texts, the production of the play itself was stylistically rooted in European proscenium theatre. Kathryn Hansen talks about the origins of Parsi theatre in Mumbai, explaining that European plays were first seen on a proscenium

stage located on the Bombay Green, which opened in 1776. This theatre—the Bombay Amateur Theatre—eventually burned down, but several other theatre spaces were soon to follow and, eventually, in 1876, C.S. Nazir, a Parsi actor-manager, built the Gaiety Theatre. Hansen writes,

> Designed by an architect named Campbell, its stage dimensions were seventy by forty feet, with a curtain height of twenty-two feet. The Governor, Sir Richard Temple, took responsibility for supervising the crafting of the painted drop scene. The image chosen was one to reinforce civic pride: "a fine view of Back Bay with the new public buildings—of which the High Courts, the Clock Tower, and the Secretariat are the most prominent—from Malabar Point". (2002: 40–9)

What this description tells us is that Parsi theatre was born in a setting that belonged to a theatrical tradition different from both the classical and folk styles commonly seen in India.[5] The European proscenium stage was a technological marvel as well as the epitome of "good theatre". The Parsi troupes that played in Madras presented audiences with an alternative to the traditional therukoothu performances, which were rarely seen in urban spaces in any case, while also presenting a new kind of engagement with the proscenium stage, which was reserved for the elites (either elite English theatre or for elite musical and dance performances) until then. So, when Bhaskaran writes about the popularity of the travelling Parsi troupes in Madras in the 1870s ("Popular Theatre and the Rise of Nationalism in South India" in Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader, Oxford University Press, 2011), he is also writing about the rise of a very specific kind of theatre and how it became the norm for certain sections of the local populace. The class of people that enjoyed and were influenced by Parsi theatre was primarily the growing labour class, whose interest in theatre stemmed in part from wanting to establish a cultural stronghold different from classical or "official" culture in the city. Workers used it as a means of entertainment, but also as a space in which their issues, troubles, etc., could be aired. Bhaskaran (2011: 134) writes, "During the 1870s Parsi and Marathi drama companies who camped and played in Madras demonstrate that dramatic organisations were a commercial proposition." He goes on to talk about how some local Tamil troupes borrowed from Parsi theatre in terms of style, dramatic structure, and in some cases the structure of the troupe itself. There was also another class of people who were interested in what the Parsi theatre troupes were doing.

Around the same time that company drama was being influenced by Parsi theatre, a smaller,

educated elite took an interest in it. Theatre artists like Pammal Sambandam Mudaliar who founded the Suguna Vilasa Sabha in Madras began to see in theatre the possibility of a higher art form. Mudaliar, considered the "father of modern Tamil theatre", was also one of the more serious theatre artists responsible for giving Tamil theatre an aura of respectability: an aura that was until then thought to be seriously lacking in the "low-class" performances that also took place in the city (referring to therukoothu, company dramas, and special dramas). In *The Oxford Companion to Modern Indian Theatre*, it is noted:

> Born in Madras he (Mudaliar) detested Tamil plays, which he found obscene and crude, but held some respect for English drama…. Mudaliar's productions brought to the forefront the dignity of theatre as a profession and dealt with actors as respectable citizens. Eminent personalities patronised his shows. He was responsible for earning theatre a legitimate space in the cultural activity of Tamil Nadu.[6] (Lal 2004: 267; emphasis mine)

This legitimacy was granted under the aegis of "Sabha theatre". The Sabha was an institution that decided what was staged and what was not; it decided where plays happened, provided funding in some instances, and, most importantly, it provided theatre producers with audiences. By the 1960s, when Sabha theatre was reaching its zenith, plays were happening regularly and theatres were packed.

With protests and demonstrations in aid of the independence movement occurring in the 1920s and 1930s, theatre artists and writers contributed to the cause by performing plays and composing songs and poems about the same. The process of political awakening, Bhaskaran says, was much slower to take root in Madras. However, when it did take root amongst theatre artists, it was seen as extremely beneficial: "Such encouragement did not only give a fillip to the drama movement but also conferred on the theatre artists a respectability that they had not enjoyed hitherto" (Bhaskaran 2011: 143). Sabha theatre, however, had a different relationship to such political awakenings. Talking about Sabha theatre, Interviewee One said,

> I saw every Tamil play that happened in Chennai at that time [the 1960s]. There were many troupes that were operating: there was satire which was done by Cho and his group, called "Viveka Fine Arts". They did political satire. Then there was S.V. Sahasranamam and his group; [they] did what was called social theatre-like *Policekaran*

> *Magal* and *Vadivelu Vathiyaar*: strong, socially-oriented plays for whole families. And then there was this old follower of Nawab Raja Manickam, R.S. Manohar, who did mythological plays and legends. They were huge plays like *Indarjith* and *Elangeswaran*, you know, with legendary characters from mythologies, and he had a staff of 100 people working for him, so a lot of special effects and all that. Then, for comedy, there was Poornam Viswanathan, who did very middle-class comedy, a lot like "Washington into the Manam". It connected with middle-class families and so he had his slot. (Interviewee One 2016)

So the contents of Sabha theatre though capable of political commentary, were not political in the same way that street theatre and special theatre of the previous decades had been. By the 1950s and 1960s, the urgency of the independence movement had faded and had been replaced by a new kind of urgency—the urgency to modernise and catch up with the rest of the world. The process of modernisation required many different kinds of processes and infrastructures, but the most interesting process was related to the work that went into the "imagination" of the modern itself. Appadurai writes of the "imagination of the global" with reference to the relationship between mass-mediated events and migratory audiences, saying that "the work of the imagination, viewed in this context (referring to the post-electronic world), is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a contested space within which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern." (1996: 4)

In the period that we are discussing, the nature of the image had already changed, and film viewing was a popular alternative to theatre. The people of Madras who engaged in Tamil theatre were exposed to global discourses of feminism, humanitarianism, and the call to return to one's cultural roots. The plays that were being performed at the time—especially social and mythological plays—were thus part of a certain imagination of what modern Tamil society needed to look like, what it needed to stand for, and what it could not forget. At the same time, the Sabha played quite well into the modern ideal of organised culture. The audiences were mostly middle class (a mix of both the lower-middle and upper-middle-class). The upper-middle-class here was an interesting addition to the audience base because initially, they considered all drama vulgar. The explanation for this change of heart could be that most of the theatre groups functioning in the Sabha circuit were in fact started, owned, and operated by men from the upper-middle-class and upper-caste families. Also, like amateur performers today, the actors, directors, and writers all had full-time jobs and

pursued theatre out of a personal interest and passion for it. The class and caste these theatre artists belonged to was, therefore, very different from the class of the artists who worked in company dramas.[7] Theatre was made "respectable" by this fact.

THE MADRAS PLAYERS AND ENGLISH THEATRE IN CHENNAI

Around that same time, a much smaller theatre group was also achieving moderate success amongst an even more exclusive section of Madras society. In 1955, Madras Players was established and it was certainly one of a kind. The group was extremely small: There were 10 to 15 members at most and their audience numbered between 50 and 60. It all began, the story goes, when a group of young people, students, and working professionals started to take part in the regular play readings and smaller performances organised by the British Council in Madras in the 1950s. According to Interviewee One,

> The British Council used to have the Madras Dramatic Society and the expats used to regale themselves with doing plays: You know they were doing Shaw and Wilde and things and the natives—so to speak—were doing backstage, moving furniture, and were doing maybe non-speaking roles or small speaking roles. (2015)

Later on, these young students and working professionals began to participate in the plays themselves and the British Council, which had already become a foreign institute keen on promoting the arts, culture, and literacy in English by this time, handed the reins over to local amateurs. Madras Players was, thus, established as an amateur theatre group independent of the British Council, though they admit that in the early years, the Council gave them considerable support and encouragement.

What is not talked about in this narrative is a connection—any connection—to the Tamil theatre mentioned earlier. The interviewee who provided me with information about the beginnings of Madras Players told me emphatically that there had been no interaction between the Tamil Sabha theatre of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and Madras Players. This is not a lie: There are absolutely no references to Madras Players working with any Tamil groups in that period, and there are no references to common audiences or collaborative works. Tamil and English theatre grew separately, or so it seems at first glance. The people that participated in ET had their imagination of what that modern Indian state needed to look like, and so it is not very hard to understand that there was a

disassociation between the two. However, it must be noted that Tamil theatre, both the older traditions and those that grew alongside the Madras Players, made tangible contributions to ET. The practices of Tamil theatre inadvertently created a space for performance in Madras. I do not mean here the actual physical space but the milieu of theatre itself that was created by the vibrant Tamil troupes and performers that worked in the city. This is especially true of Sabha theatre of the 1940s and 1950s, which was similar to the English theatre of the same period in terms of production aesthetics and narrative structures. In the 1970s, just after having reached its zenith, Tamil theatre began to go into a sort of decline. In Madras, this was true of the amateur/semi-professional groups previously mentioned. Interviewee One describes both the height of Tamil theatre and its decline:

> There was this set of seven plays that were really a turning point in Tamil theatre. They were directed by K. Balachander who, at that time, was superintendent, or whatever he was, at the AG's [attorney general's] office—this was before he went into film. He did a series of seven plays: massive successes under the title of Ragini Recreations. He started with *Major Chandrakanth*. That play was how Major Sundarrajan, the actor, got his name. Then a play called *Mirugapathi* and a lot of plays with Nagesh: *Neer Kumizhi*, *Ethirneechal*, *Nanal* ... and in the seven plays, he introduced the idea of the one-set play to Tamil theatre. Until then, everything was curtains and lifting up scenery to go to the next scene. Balachander introduced the concept of character, story, and the one-set play. And, of course, many of his plays were made into films. Yes, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a lot of Tamil theatre happening. Every Saturday and Sunday was either a Cho play or a Y.G. Parthasarthy play or a Balachander play, and they played to full houses. It was when the television soaps started that the death knell of Tamil theatre rang. All the audiences went there. And the artists also automatically went into serials—that was full time work and they had work every day, [got] paid after every day's shoot. So, a majority of them did go into television. Only a few remained with theatre because of the passion. (2016)

Whether the death knell of Tamil theatre has been rung is arguable: Numerous groups that work in Chennai currently would undoubtedly object to being thus written off. What is true, however, is that Tamil theatre did lose audiences to television and film. And yet, this same period saw the rise of ET via Madras Players. Madras Players was doing some of their best work: They had access to

competent technicians, stage directors, set designers, and sponsors, and were also drawing in relatively much larger audiences. What happened was that the theatre created and performed by Madras Players and other theatre groups active in the 1980s and 1990s (such as Magic Lantern, Masquerade, and The Little Theatre) led to the creation of a "sentient" ET-going audience between the 1950s and 1990s.

Lynn M. Voskuil talks of the popularity of sensation theatre in London during the mid-and late 1800s and how "in their shared, somatic responses to sensation plays, Victorians envisioned a kind of affective adhesive that massed them to each other in an inchoate but tenacious nineteenth-century incarnation of the English public sphere" (2002: 245). Voskuil uses the idea of "sentience" to talk about how spectators "felt responses" to what they were seeing on stage "believed they felt them in common" (2002: 245). Voskuil goes on to claim that the audiences constituted through the watching of sensation theatre created a sort of public sphere that was divorced from what she considers the constraining requirements of "space" and "discourse" demanded of most public spheres. Through the production and staging of ET in Chennai from the 1950s, very specific segments of the middle class were being constituted as performers and audiences who "performed" and "responded" to the theatre "properly". While I cannot argue that a kind of public sphere was created, there was a process of identification and classification that created a sense of shared cultural space and values defined by class.

DEFINING ENGLISH THEATRE

In order to discuss these shared cultural values, let us discuss what ET is. According to one interviewee,

> To me it's always a language. It's a language of communication that is sometimes chosen because of the simplicity, because it is the easier language to use to reach out to audiences in India. But it has never meant to me a certain kind of theatre. (Interviewee Six 2015)

Two things are of interest to us in that idea of ET: first, the idea of the simplicity of English as a link language; and second, interviewees claiming not to consider ET a kind of theatre. Here, we first deal with English as a language. Anne Norton (2004: 13) writes that language is "a means of movement into the external world, a medium into which interiority escapes the self. This process

is reciprocal: the self extends its will, its thoughts, itself, into the external world, and the world enters the innermost self though the medium of language." This understanding of language is useful because it allows us to ask questions about those selves and the external worlds they occupy. In the last 70 odd years English has indeed undergone the processes of 1) "abrogation" or "a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words." (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002: 37); and 2) "appropriation" or "the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002: 38). English has entered local Indian cultural fabrics while losing or adapting some of its colonial contexts. The language and whatever morality it once carried with it has changed drastically over the years. The question, then, is: What has it become? The argument that within theatre it is primarily a link language is seemingly unexceptionable. Until you ask the question, "Who is English making things simple for?" In the case of ET, there is always already a pre-existing group that already "knows" English and they are always the target audience. So, then, ET does not necessarily function to link disparate populaces, and any instances of it doing so might be coincidental or even superficial.

Though English might not work to link disparate populaces, it certainly acts as a common language within the existing class culture. This brings us directly to our second point of interest: Interviewee Six had mentioned an inability to identify with ET being "a kind of theatre". Interviewee Seven was of a similar frame of mind. In response to the question "Is ET a kind of theatre—a class of theatre even?", they said,

> I don't agree with either. Especially now. A lot of people are engaging with what we called experimental theatre or forum theatre so more than the language, more the way you approach the process of creating the theatre is changing. And it's exciting. So, I don't know whether people are entering the theatre with a mindset of an English identity. I would personally believe that they're a part of it because they like the process of storytelling and performance. And whether it is movement based or dialogue based or language based, mythology based it shouldn't matter as much as the need to tell a story. (Interviewee Seven 2015)

The interviewee's assumption that people's participation in and enjoyment of theatre lies outside of their identities is an interesting one. It harks to that old argument of "art for art's sake" or at least to one interpretation of it. The idea that art—and by extension practitioners of the arts—must stand outside of social mores, norms, and utilitarian value is not an uncommon one. It is, however, difficult to implement. After all, how does one stand aside from a class, a personal history, the morality that it fosters, and the aesthetic that it nurtures? Surely their participation in an artistic practice cannot somehow cut them off from the larger culture they inadvertently add to? If that were the case, where would this "need to tell a story" come from in the first place?

MIDDLE-CLASS IDENTITIES

The term "middle class" is broadly accepted in academic research and understood to mean a certain level of monetary independence and access to resources, but a specific definition is lacking. A study conducted by Devesh Kapur and Milan Vaishnav on a panel survey conducted by the Centre for Advanced Study of India where they asked people whether they considered themselves "middle class". The answers were surprising because "nearly half (49 per cent) of all survey respondents believed their family is a middle-class family... Self-identification as middle class is expectedly more prevalent amongst urban respondents (56 per cent) but the share of rural individuals claiming to be middle class is also remarkably high (46 per cent)" (Kapur and Vaishnav 2014). The most popular understanding of the term "middle class" looks to the idea of income (per day or annum). However, such definitions are more appropriate when deciding what constitutes a middle-income household, a term that is not synonymous with middle class, though often used interchangeably (Kochhar 2015). While there exist several contesting opinions of how middle-income households should be categorised, we do not go into them in detail here. It would suffice to point out that most indicators of income levels use absolute scales such as per capita income and daily wage.

Historically, the middle class was formed as the result of historical processes that began during colonial rule. Fernandes states that these processes instituted by the British created different middle classes in different regions that shared some elements like

> specific kinds of socioeconomic resources such as access to English education and modern forms of professional employment ... an emerging set of political claims of public representativeness that this group made within the realm of democratic civic life ... claim of representation which was continually accompanied by a project of

> self-identification that was marked by a politics of distinction from both the colonial state and more marginalized social groups. (Fernandes 2006: 2)

In this way, Fernandes establishes a firm link between middle-class identity and colonial influence. In the 300-odd-year period of British involvement in and control of life on the Indian subcontinent, colonialism was a "social thing"[8] that impacted—and continues to impact—local cultures in different ways: the formation of the middle class is an excellent example of that. But the middle class is also an identity that references an imagination of its role in the state: It is also, therefore, "a *class-in-practice*—that is, as a class defined by its politics and the everyday practices through which it reproduces its privileged position" (Fernandes and Heller 2006: 487). This links directly to what Appadurai discusses when he writes about imagination "in its collective forms", where "ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labour prospects" are created (Appadurai 1996: 7). The middle class is then a class that partakes in "practices of imagination", where the creation of a class identity rests quite heavily on the ability of the members of the class to imagine themselves as belonging to the class and simultaneously imagining what the nation/state/community they resided in is, what the material realities of this space are, and what specific roles they play in bringing these realities about.

In this process of imagination, there also rises a series of cultural expectations and experiences. In the last 40 years, those expectations have varied significantly. Rajgopal then tells us that post-independence and, more specifically, post Emergency, the relationship between the Indian middle class and government transformed. The middle class's perception of the state's functions with regard to governance, coercion and consent, and national development shifted. He states that the economic policy in the 1980s and 1990s was influenced by how "the state itself participated in the transferral of legitimacy away from itself to the market and in promoting the initiative of private forces in economic progress and nation-building…. These events are critical to understanding the formation of the new middle class in India as a category that increasingly comes under the sway of corporate capital expressing itself through cultural and consumerist forms of identity and is less identified with the state" (Rajgopal 2011: 6). When Rajgopal talks of the "new" Indian middle class, he does not mean the actual creation of a whole new class but the transformation of the middle class's perceptions of itself: a class of middlemen existing between coloniser and colony, and perhaps later as the class that could best assist the newly created nation in its search for unity,

development, and modernity. The "new" middle class alternatively thinks of itself as a class that can (and has to) actively participate in the quickly globalising world.

CLASS CULTURE

One way to approach the cultural expectations and experiences of the middle class would be to analyse the class within the ambit of class cultures. We discussed this earlier when trying to understand why middle-class practices are studied less often. To expand on that, the idea of class culture suggests that the class positions of people affect the kinds of cultural practices they take part in and support. The idea is in many ways obvious, but it is not easily implemented. First, we face the problem of acknowledging the transitory nature of culture itself. Culture is not fixed in space or time, or, one could argue, to a social group. Appadurai refers to this when discussing the cultural aspects of globalisation. Culture, he points out, is better analysed not in its noun form "culture" but as an adjective ("cultural") because the latter does not fall into the trap of having to "substantialise" culture. Instead, it allows for culture to be looked at as an aspect or a characteristic of a certain set of practices or of certain abstract imaginations that highlight, not its physicalities but the differences that are borne from it. Appadurai writes,

> Culture is not usefully regarded as a substance but is better regarded as a dimension of phenomena, a dimension that attends to situated and embodied differences. Stressing the dimensionality of culture rather than its substantiality permits our thinking of culture less as a property of individuals and groups and more as a heuristic device that we can use to talk about difference.[9] (1996: 13)

Looking at culture in such a way denies the existence of "actual social groups as cultures". It moves analysis away from the trap of having to contend with the question of ownership within class cultures. From here, it is easier to highlight the fact that the set of cultural activities that may form a particular class culture *has* to be transitory and constantly shifting. As Mark Liechty states, "class culture is always a *work-in-progress*" (2002: 4). This was a problem that came up during my attempt to define and categorise how ET becomes a sort of class culture for the upper-middle-class elite of the city. The ever-changing nature of the theatre groups, the allowances of some cross-class exchanges, the hybrid theatre groups that worked in both vernacular languages and English but still catered to specific class expectations, the strange relationships between theatre and the digital,

and attempts to create original content—all this has to be accounted for. If the idea of the class culture is problematic, then why use it? The answer to that lies in the rest of Liechty's statement: "Class culture is always a *work-in-progress*", he says, but adds, "a perpetual social construction that is as fundamentally bound to the 'concrete' of economic resources as it is to the cultural practices of people who jointly negotiate their social identities." (2002: 4) There is always an economic and therefore productive aspect to culture.

CONCLUSION

Theatre offers an interesting point of analysis from which to consider contemporary urban culture. Theatre's complicated relationship with the people who practise it and with the community it claims to serve means that analysis through theatre can lay bare the collective imaginations of the people involved and allow a study of how these imaginations result in practices and actions that have material impacts. Appadurai puts it best when he talks about the projective capabilities of the imagination in the modern world:

> The imagination [….] has a projective sense about it, the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression, whether aesthetic or otherwise. Fantasy can dissipate [….] but the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action. It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape. (1996: 7)

When Rajgopal writes about the shifting preoccupations and concerns of the middle class, he also references a shifting imagination. Post-liberalisation, the policy changes wrought in the country had a real effect on how citizens produced and consumed cultural items. Toor writes that the liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG) policies implemented in India "under the watchful eye of the IMF/World Bank" were intended to "reintegrate" India "into the world economy in 1991–92" (2000: 2). She further writes that though liberalisation was being experimented within the 1980s in India, the policies of 1991–2 present a much clearer break from the experiments with socialism that defined the Indian economy in the post-independence period. It was only several years after the LPG policies were in place that "the ideology of global-local

capitalism has managed to construct the level of hegemony that allows a globally-oriented capitalist consumer culture to truly manifest itself in Indian society" (Toor 2000: 1). The most important facet of liberalisation is not the change that it may have wrought in the ways that goods and services were produced but in how it was "the beginning of a new way of relating to the rest of the world" (Toor 2000: 27). By the mid-2000s, Madras had been Chennai for eight years and had been feeling the effects of liberalisation for 13. The idea that the city and its people were entering a new era was certainly in the air. With ET groups, there were movements made towards professionalisation and financialisation, especially by newer groups who had sprung up in the 2000s. While we cannot go into it all in this paper, I propose that these shifts towards monetised models of theatre-making followed from the changed perceptions that theatre-makers had about themselves and the role their art form played in the city, and that these perceptions are heavily influenced by the presence of neoliberal rationalities, where "market values" are extended to "all institutions and social action".[10] Such rationalities find the story of fluke a perfect foundation from which to adjust the collective imaginations of all participants. The story of fluke, after all, discounts historical continuity, favouring narratives that place individuals and institutions in vacuums, where success and failure are solely matters of effort, and rarely about cultural settings, privilege, and access to resources.

APPENDIX

Interviewee Profiles

S. no.	Interviewee	Age	Education and/or Profession	Hometown
1.	Interviewee One	70	Voice actor and writer	Chennai
2.	Interviewee Two	22	BA Economics	Chennai
3	Interviewee Three	27	Chartered Accountancy	Chennai
4	Interviewee Four	65	Theatre Director, Writer	Chennai

5	Interviewee Five	30	Head of Human Resources	Chennai
6	Interviewee Six	42	Theatre Director, Trainer, and Actor	Delhi
7	Interviewee Seven	26	Theatre Trainer and Actor	Jaipur
8	Interviewee Eight	23	Theatre Trainer and Actor; studying acting	Chennai
9	Interviewee Nine	39	MBA, Theatre Producer	Bhopal
10	Interviewee Ten	50	Theatre Trainer, Actor, Writer, and Director	Chennai
11	Interviewee Eleven	60	Theatre Director	Chennai
12	Interviewee Twelve	59	Journalism	Chennai
13	Interviewee Thirteen	47	Production Design and Theatre Director and Actor	Chennai
14	Interviewee Fourteen	23	BA English, Theatre Director and Actor	Chennai

Interview Guide

The Question Guide

1) a) Name
   b) Age
   c) Occupation and/or educational qualification
   d) Home town
   e) Caste (later omitted)
2) What was your first experience with theatre?
3) How did your involvement in theatre go on from there?
4) What were areas of interest within theatre?

5) What does production mean to you?

6) What do you think English theatre means?

7) Do you see theatre as a political tool? Should it be?

8) Do you see theatre as an employment opportunity?

9) Did/Do you watch a lot of other plays in the city?

10) What do you think of these plays?

11) Where do you find yourself performing the most? Why?

12) What do you think of theatre festivals happening in the city?

The structure of the interviews was extremely loose, and in most cases, these questions acted only as a guide. In some interviews, certain questions were forgone; in others, as the conversation progressed, questions changed form. The large area of discussion, however, remained theatre in the city and the experiences of the interviewees. In some cases, where theatre spaces were being discussed and conversation veered towards discussions of the city itself, the interview was abandoned so as to maintain the flow of conversation. Similarly, when interviewees were able to provide rich histories of theatre from the mid- and late 1900s, the interview guide was not referred to.

Nayantara Nayar is a playwright, researcher, and storyteller based out of Chennai, India. She has a background in theatre and education, documentary film and sociology. Her play "The Lottery" was short-listed for the Hindu PlayWriting Award 2018. It was further selected to be workshopped at UnBlock 2019, conducted by Rage Theatre, Mumbai, and Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, UK. Her most recent works include "Limits of Change", a performance–visual art project about the Indian involvement in the Korean War in 1953 and "The Body", a play commissioned by Rage Theatre, Mumbai, and Enacte Theatre, California, USA, for production in July of 2021.

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[1] Though I do not mention them by name, I have provided a list of profiles for each of the interviewees in the Appendix. Also in the appendix is the questionnaire I used for the interviews, though in several interviews, the conversation turned away from the questions I was asking, usually to more interesting subjects, and in those instances, I have gone off-script. In this way, the interviews provided me with a base from which I could begin analysis.

[2] Appadurai talks of how writing that analyses caste in India tended to follow three streams of Western thought: those of essentialising it, exoticising it, and totalising it.

[3] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Pantheon or the Public Assembly Rooms was a space available to the European community in Madras for galas, theatre, balls, etc.

[4] Madras is the older name of the city of Chennai. The name is now associated with the British and their rule.

[5] This European tradition influenced the way in which Parsi troupes created and represented on stage narratives and spaces, leading them towards a more realistic approach to theatre. Troupes could use well-crafted and elaborate screen paintings and backdrops to draw audiences into the narrative of the play more effectively. They also used the structure of the proscenium to create optical illusions: to make characters appear and disappear or to transport audiences to distant lands. The proscenium allowed for a sort of hyper-real fantasy setting that awed and excited audiences wherever they toured.

[6] Mudaliar did go on to become a prolific theatre writer and director, and his troupe, Suguna Vilasa Sabha, used prose as a necessary part of its plays, creating two- to three-hour-long performances that had many similarities to European theatre. Mudaliar's theatre heralded the time of the "sabha natakan".

[7] Company drama itself was severely affected by the growth of the Tamil film industry. The stage lost many actors, writers, and musicians to Tamil films, and in Madras at least, company drama never adapted and, hence, never recovered. In many ways, Sabha theatre did fill the growing vacuum company drama left, but the content,

audiences, and intent was wholly different. It is important to point out that these dramas, influenced and inspired by Parsi theatre, had their own role to play in the transformation of Tamil theatre.

[8] Durkheim called this property of certain events or chains of action within history "the social fact" (Durkheim, E. 2013: 29) and I think it is not too different from C.W. Mills's (2000) "the sociological imagination" either. Avoiding any positivist trends that such a concept can lend itself to, I use the term to delineate an area in which I believe a "sociology of knowledge" could be applied so that we can examine *how we think* about various phenomena.

[9] Appadurai continues:

> But there are many kinds of differences in the world and only some of these are cultural. And here I bring in a second component of my proposal about the adjectival form of the word culture. I suggest that we regard as cultural only those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities. (1996: 13)

[10] According to Brown (2005: 39–40),

> Neoliberalism is not simply a set of economic policies; it is not only about facilitating free trade, maximising corporate profits, and challenging welfarism. Rather, neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player.

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Histories in Slavery

Questioning Memory through *Shetkaryacha Asud*

Adwaita Banerjee

ABSTRACT

Memory is useful in interrogating the limits of the term history, if history is a form of political communication and what this would mean for its conceptual underpinnings. History as seen through the eyes of Mahatma Phule's *Shetkaryacha Asud* (Cultivator's Whipcord [1881]), could be useful here. In the period following British occupation of the subcontinent, Phule tries to understand the cultural and social changes around him. Born into a lower caste family, Phule, pioneered the attack on the institutions of Brahmanism and their dominance within both agrarian societies and colonial administration. Inspired by Thomas Paine's Rights of Man, *Shetkaryacha Asud* is representative of collective memory through an interaction of different kinds of historical factors that interact with each other.

The paper would be looking at the interpretation and reception of collective memory and its related communication through Phule's works. This paper depends on critical discourse analysis that has its basis on caste. Within the paper I try to question the notion of history and memory. Phule looks at historical methodology as a socio-cultural process with pragmatic interventions in the present. History here is seen as a conscious, ideological and political assertion.

KEYWORDS

caste, South Asia, memory, peasant, history

The son of an unknown lower-caste family, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, pioneered the attack on the institution of Brahmanism and their dominance within both agrarian societies and colonial administration. Born in Pune, in the then Bombay Presidency, shortly after the East India Company's assumption of power in Western India, Phule lived and worked in rapidly changing times. With the defeat of the last ruler or *peshwa* of the Marathas, Bajirao II, at the hands of the British East India Company, a new era of governance, rule of law, and communication came into being.

Changes in status of the larger system of hierarchies, within which the Hindu society was constructed, presented a number of issues. The caste system, which signified an institutionalisation of Brahmanical dominance, meant that only certain social groups could access literacy and learning owing to their ritual purity, while on the other end of the spectrum were the Shudras and Atishudras, who were only seen fit to serve the role of servants and as providers of material support due to their impurity. Between these two varnas or caste groups were the Kshatriyas, or warrior castes, and the Vaishyas, or the merchant castes. Even though the agricultural castes included a number of Shudras with substantial landholdings, their material prosperity had no effect on their location on the caste hierarchy (Weber 1958).

With the coming of Christian missionaries, men like Jyotiba Phule could finally access education, hitherto reserved for only the Brahmins. This brought in new opportunities to bring in fundamental changes in attitudes towards their status as Shudras.

History, on the one hand, brings intellectuals who share the weight of the contemporary crisis in the discourse of remembering as concerned citizens. As experts of the past, they have to explore the changing faces of identity and the uncertainties that resulted from the period following the British occupation of a large part of India in the mid-nineteenth century and the challenges of coming to terms with accelerating rates of social and political changes brought about by the colonial regime. On the other hand, the study of memory as an exercise is purely academic in its origin and outlook. It allows academics to answer to the philosophical legacies of moments in time gone by.

This combination of social relevance and intellectual challenge explains the popularity of studies of collective memory. Memory has become a central concept within the humanities and social sciences. It could, thus, be useful to look at the limits of the term "history", if history could be indeed a form of political communication, and what this would mean for its conceptual underpinnings. History as

seen through the eyes of Mahatma Phule's *Shetkaryacha Asud* (*Cultivator's Whipcord*), written in 1881, is useful in this regard.

Inspired by Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1792), Phule's work is representative of collective memory through an interaction of three kinds of historical factors: intellectual and cultural traditions that are instrumental in framing our past; memory makers who communicate and adopt these traditions; and memory consumers who receive and transform these artefacts according to their needs and group interests. This work could indeed be understood as a kind of intervention within the larger prospect of writing history for the subcontinent as well as a resistance to the hegemonic voices that have had the right to speak for Indian pasts.

We, as interpreters of collective memory, are placed in a precarious position. Collective memory is not history but it is a construct made of elements similar to the ones that make up history. Phule's work, then, is an exercise in creating and communicating a kind of collective memory. His construction of the contemporary becomes socio-historical transformed into a pragmatic intervention within the contemporary. It could be seen as a result of conscious manipulation as well as unconscious absorption through political mediation. If we compare Phule's work to the more "academic" subaltern studies school of historiography, this becomes one of the more important distinctions. *Shetkaryacha Asud* represents a new approach to "popular consciousness".

SHETKARYACHA ASUD AND ITS MEMORIES

In the period between 1882 and 1883, Phule wrote a number speeches and lectures which were later collected together in a single manuscript and presented to the Earl of Dufferin, the governor-general of India. This manuscript, which was about five chapters long, came to be known as *Shetkaryacha Asud*. The first two chapters of the book appeared in *Din Bandhu* newspaper in a serialised fashion in 1883 under the editorship of Narayan Meghaji Londhe. Following this, Londhe refused to publish the last three chapters as he felt that they were extremely critical of the British government's policy towards cultivators and could bring trouble for the newspaper (Phadke 1979). The book was eventually published after Phule's death. It was intended as a form of communication to influence British policy,

presenting the cultivator's case within their realties. Simultaneously, it was aimed for the rural audiences of the Satyashodhak Samaj.[1]

A lot of effort within the book went into look closely at the elements of material life, including social and economic aspects, which the rural audience could be receptive to. The account was simple, presented in the words of an imaginary cultivator who lays out his difficulties of acute poverty and indebtedness. Phule does not implicate himself as a poor cultivator in the way that he describes the conditions of the non-Brahmins. The cultivator is seen as someone who has to fight for his/her survival and meet the quotas set up by creditors and government officials with poverty and dereliction being part of his/her house, family, and livestock. It is also made amply evident that this condition that the cultivator now faces has not always been the case, and that his determination and self-respect were waning only now. This kind of assertion, it seems, brings about a fracture in the way in which the lower castes are visualised: from common historicity of one oppressed community to a group who are united by their shared social experiences.

The deprivation that a cultivator faces is seen in relation to the idyllic lives of Brahmins, who were employed by the British government. For instance, in one part, Phule describes the cultivator's diet, which would have all the signs of abject poverty including *bhakari*s and watery (lentil) in the afternoon and maize or *jondhali* in the evening. This is compared with the Brahmin's diet, which he calls a wedding feast with its array of rich, extravagant dishes (Phule 1969: 233–9).

Other than their labour, the peasants are seen to form rural communities with cooperation and honesty that result from shared social experiences. Phule asserts that such rural communities should be the basis for government institutions rather than literate elites whose interests lay in different spheres.

Contrasting the productive and unproductive groups within the background of British institutions, Phule blamed the British rule for increasing the problems of poverty and discrimination among the peasants. But his real motives did not lay in just laying down the effects of the British rule; he also

[1] Also called Truth-Seekers' Society. This was a social reform organisation founded by Jyotirao Phule in Pune, Maharashtra, in the year 1873. The society's focus in lay in reforming education and creating social and political access for underprivileged groups, especially Shudras, Dalits, and women.

aimed to present the unequal distribution of resources between the peasant classes and the bourgeoisie. This naturally included an analysis of Brahmanism and changes within the caste structure through colonial intervention.

Phule focused his critique of the colonial regime on its focus of setting up bureaucratic structures that were made up of either European or Brahmin officials in its upper echelons, being both incompetent and corrupt. These groups enjoyed work benefits, the cost of which had to be borne by the toiling peasants. For instance, local taxes that were collected for providing primary education to the masses aided those institutions that helped Brahmin children the most (Phule 1969: 231).

The systemic incompetence hurt cultivators the most. Thus, they were more concerned with their own survival rather than gaining knowledge about their surroundings. Further, their inability to converse in Marathi meant that they had to rely on intermediate officials who themselves were corrupt and exploitative (Phule 1969: 249).

In spite of these difficulties, Phule believed that the British administration had the potential to restructure rural society and the key to this change would have to be through education. He planned in setting a standard of justice in society through which anyone who did not labour to earn a livelihood would be termed a parasite. This was done to check the hegemony of the moneylender, and this was instrumental in the non-Brahmin polemic in the 1890s and later. To a certain degree, this showed the growth of the non-Brahmin movement from its initial base among the urban literate class to more rural centers that were concerned with village agriculture. However, Phule remained concerned with the oppressions of the oppressive Brahminic religion. Phule critiqued the Agricultural Relief Act of 1879, as a follow up of the Deccan Riots of 1875 and the Bombay Government Report (1875) into their causes (Phule 1969: 230–1). The British government, in fact, had very little reason to charge the small moneylenders, they instead charged a large rate of interest on the subcontinental debt as a whole. When there was exploitation by the moneylenders, Phule felt that the bureaucracy was to blame. The Act of 1879 simply resulted in a situation where "no self-respecting moneylender will now let a cultivator even stand at his door" (Phule 1969: 209).

At an earlier stage, Phule had stated that untouchables within the lower-caste community were the touchstone of a genuine caste-free society. It is evident from his later organisational work till his death in 1890 that he never forgot this fact. One of the first leaders of the untouchable movement was

Gopal Baba Valangakar, a Mahar from Ravadula, near Mahad in Konkan. Through his brief stint in the army, he had received rudimentary education. In 1888, he published a pamphlet called *The Elimination of Untouchability* and, in the same year, founded "The Society for Removing the Stigma of Non-Aryan Origin". He suggested that untouchables were initially Kshatriyas who had become polluted by eating meat during famines. This a clear case of tension as the other non-Brahmin thinkers generally equated Kshatriyas with those having Aryan origin. This was despite the fact that wider structure of resistance was against the hegemonic Hindu hierarchies.

Phule also realised, as seen through his writing at this phase, that the issues of the peasants and those of the untouchables had to be seen through different lenses, even though their problems derived directly from the Brahmanic religion itself. In a separate unpublished work titled "The Tale of the Untouchables", he looked into the misery of the untouchables in relation to their material conditions in life and the kind of lower-than-human status that the Hindu society had accorded them. It is clear that he never gave up the ideological stance that all non-Brahmin castes could be included in the Kshatriya category, which was an exception to the non-Brahmin polemic of the 1890s. Phule was adept in his use of symbols to establish the Satyashodhak Samaj as a representative of the peasant class which went beyond the publication of *Shetkaryacha Asud*.

WRITING PEASANT HISTORIES IN INDIA

The notion of race that we see prevailing in the nineteenth century came to dominate the ways by which we visualise caste/tribe within the country and to that effect the concept of the peasant was imagined in such a manner. C.A. Bayly (1997: 4) clearly states that "race science" became a "more insistent theme in India after 1840" (which in turn became of utmost importance by the 1870s for instituting acts against tribes and peasants to the end of procuring cheap supplies of labour). British historians like W.W. Hunter and H.H. Risley do contend that caste and "race are all but the same thing" (Bayly 1997: 228). This kind of consideration goes a long way in paving the road for the discipline of anthropology to become the "principal colonial modality of knowledge and rule" after 1857, and, from 1870, it becomes the primary object of social classification and ordering (Dirks 2002: 45).

For example, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* by E.T. Dalton came out in 1872, and focused on caste in a manner of ethnological account. H.H. Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* was published in 1891,

and, in 1896, *Tribes and Castes of the North Western Provinces and Oudh* prepared by W. Crooke was brought out. However, as stated by Dirks (Ibid: 48), "the spirit of caste attained its apotheosis with the census", which began in the year 1872. The commitment to "race science" by the British authorities as an accurate "modality of knowledge" deeply influenced the rulers and the subject alike. O'Malley (1913: 440) states that people did come to perceive the census as a measure to ascertain "the relative status of different castes and to deal with questions of social superiority". He noted further that:

> No part of the census aroused so much excitement as the return of caste…. Hundreds of petitions were received from different castes- their weight alone amounts to one and a half maunds- requesting that they might be known by new names, be placed higher in order of precedence, be recognized as Kshatriyas. (1913: 440)

This resulted in census operations leading to rise in caste consciousness (Bandyopadhyay 1992: 31). Different caste groups started organising sabhas since 1887 to formulate and promote caste interests (Jha 1977: 14–17). One of the primary objectives of these associations was upgradation of caste status and recognition of the same as lying close of the Brahmins. The status or rather the caste status became the distance between that particular caste and that of the topmost castes, considerably reinforcing Brahmanism. Bernard Cohn (2004d: 241–2) further adds that

> Most of the basic treatises on the Indian caste system written during the period 1880 to 1950 were written by men who had important positions either as census commissioners for all of India or for a province. Among them were A. Baines, E.A.H Blunt … J.H. Hutton, D. Ibbetson … L.S.S. O'Malley, H.H. Risley.

He states further that it would not be an exaggeration to say that down until 1950 scholars' and scientists' views on the nature, structure, and functioning of the Indian caste system were shaped mainly by the data and conceptions growing out of the census operations.

In matters of conceptualising the village and the peasants, it may be said, according to L.B. Alayev, that Thomas Munro was one of the first social thinkers to refer to "village community" in 1806 (Gopal 1987: 19). The conception of the village as a political society in itself was an early nineteenth-century conception. It was posited to be a "body of co-owners of the soil", followed by the construction of the village as an "emblem of traditional economy and polity" within the national struggle, partly

influenced by R.C. Dutt's *Economic History of India* published in 1902 (Cohn 2004b: 158–9). However, it was the efforts of Henry Maine and Karl Marx that the conception of the village and its peasants was incorporated within the discipline of world history (Dumont 1966: 80). The *Land Systems of British India* was a massive work written by Baden-Powell, which was published in 1892 and empirically contradicted the views forwarded by Maine regarding the classification of villages and the patterns of land ownership. But compared to Maine, he changed little in his approach: He still looked at the changes from an evolutionary perspective. Bernard Cohn (2004b: 162) argues that "the Victorian students of Indian village were interested in the village as a type from which they could infer evolutionary stages and which could be used to compare similar developments or stages in other parts of the world."

Various reports, such as those on famines and riots, and district-wise survey settlement reports, which elaborated on the conditions of the peasantry, were also prepared during this period which added to the knowledge base regarding rural India. At this time, we also see a large number of both European and Indian Indologists translating the ancient texts of differing epistemological systems. These comprised of scholars such as Max Müller, Griffith, McCrindle, R.G. Bhandarkar, Radha Kumud Mookherji, and K.P. Jayaswal. Various centres of research were also set up in Pune, Benares, and Kolkata. For example, from 1788 to 1884, in Kolkata, 414 essays on antiquities, 140 essays on coins and gems, 143 essays on history, 305 essays on languages and literatures, and 127 essays on religion, etiquette, and rituals were produced in *Asiatick Researches* and *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Chakrabarty 2008: 9). In 1848 and onwards, we see the Bibliotheca Indica series being published. Such work, as stated by Ramakanta Chakrabarty (Ibid: 10), "motivated by the spirit of delving deep into unknown historical facts or the spirit of discovery". Indian Thought, which started to be published in Benares at the start of the twentieth century, was well received from both Indian and European scholars (Jha 1976: 109). R.G. Bhandarkar in Pune worked out new methodologies for studying the "search for the glorious past", establishing the method of "reliable evidence" and objectively working "towards the demystification of history" (Gottlob 2003: 26–7). In addition, a considerable amount of vernacular texts were also produced in languages like Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Assamese, Marathi, and Tamil (Chatterjee 2008: 1–24). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's writing (in Bengali) deals with issues of colonial subjugation and historical value. The Bengalis, at this point, were urged to write their own history as the notion of Indian modernisation having "inner space for

indigenous culture" had to be considered (Gottlob 2003: 30–1). These writings continued to inspire constructions of knowledge on Indian society, culture, and history. *Bihar Durpan*, written by Ramdeen Singh in Hindi and published in 1881, consists of a detailed account of the socio-economic conditions and lives of people of early colonial era (as quoted in Robb 1996). *Aina-i-Tirhut*, written by Bihari Lal "Fitrat" in Urdu and published in 1883, contains a varied description of historico-socio-economic conditions of the region Mithila, basing his argument on documents and surveys of villages that proved to be the primary source of data. Within Fitrat's account, we find descriptions of varied historical sites like tanks and ponds, zamindars, *kothiwals*[2], scholarship traditions, indigo planters, conditions of agriculture, and peasantry (Jha 2001). The production of the volumes of *Linguistic Survey of India* by George A. Grierson helped understand the variety in languages/dialects and subdialects of people within the country. *Bihar Peasant Life*, also written by Grierson and published in 1885, is still a classic when it comes to understanding the peasant world in North India. Thus, we can see that the works of both Eastern and Western scholars help us in broadening our historical horizons when it comes to production of texts. This added to the conception of India being based on ancient knowledge and achievements, as differing discourses came to be widely recognised. The Brahmanic texts were valued for explaining customs and understanding rituals and so on (Kosambi 2002: 3–4). This understanding about the socio-economic and cultural arenas in different gazetteers, survey settlement reports, census reports, and other documents prepared by O'Malley, Stevenson-Moore, and Baden-Powell helped produce an understanding of historical sociology (Mukherjee 1977: 22–3).

T.K. Oommen is one of the few social thinkers in the field whose study has been the "privileged field of … lifelong academic expressions, debates and writings" (Singh 2000: 73). While studying the peasant struggles in Malabar region and the Travancore-Cochin princely states (parts of Kerala), he reconstructs the process of mobilisation against the imperial regime that, in turn, led to rise of new issues and forms of protest under the influence of leftist parties (Oommen 1985b: 35–53, 180–254). He produces this text based mostly on secondary sources of information, but in addition to this, he also takes the help of vernacular literature (in Malayalam) in this context. He states that the Moplah uprisings (33 in number) in Malabar from 1836 to 1921, along with the Tebhaga, Telangana, and Naxalite movements, is one of the most widely studied agrarian movements within India (Oommen

[2] Kothiwal or Kotwal is a title, sub-caste and surname in India. From Mughal times, the Kotwal title was given to the rulers of large towns.

1990: 114). Another thinker, D.N. Dhanagare, is also seen to be working within this sphere with publications of works based on Telangana (1974), Tebhaga (1976), and Moplah (1977) movements. In addition to this, he also studied peasant movements in Uttar Pradesh (1975). In the context of his studies, he has stated:

> My purpose was to historically reconstruct social origins of a given movement and to understand its lasting impact on agrarian power structure … my findings challenge the validity of the thesis on "passivity of the Indian peasant", propounded by Barrington Moore Jr., as they also question the empirical validity of the "middle peasant thesis" advanced by Eric Wolf and Hamza Alavi. (Dhanagare 2006: 26)

His rigorous enquiry of appropriate historical records, such as gazetteers, official reports, private papers, and regional literature, helped him to disturb the image of the peasant created before him. Historians like Pushpendra Surana (1983), K.L. Sharma (1985), and Hira Singh (1998) work on ideas of the peasant struggle in Rajasthan within a certain historical framework. Surana studies the Bijolia movement that arose in erstwhile Mewar during 1917–22 against landlordism. He postulates on how religion helped in creating a sort of peasant consciousness (Surana 1983: 70–2). K.L. Sharma, on the other hand, studies the sociopolitical structure in the Rajputana estates in the medieval era, during the protest against absolutist powers, i.e., the ruling chiefs from 1913 onwards. He states that various organisations like *lok* parishads and *praja mandal*s[3] that not only worked for public welfare but were also instrumental in raising peasant consciousness (Sharma 1985: 122–33).

William R. Pinch is also seen to be doing an extensive survey of historical records right from the beginning of the eighteenth century, analysing the activities of the Vaishnava sects in the context of non-upper-caste peasant movements in Northern India in the process. He studies the Yadavas' politics for upper-caste identity for a time period ranging from the 1890s to the 1920s and the structural and

[3] The Praja Mandal movement was a part of the Indian independence movement from the 1920s in which people living in the princely states, who were subject to the rule of local aristocrats rather than the British Raj, campaigned against those feudatory rulers, and sometimes also the British administration, in attempts to improve their civil rights.

cultural politics of Kurmi, Kushvaha, and Yadava involvement in agrarian radicalism from the historical period of the 1920s to the 1940s.

Thus, we traverse through time and space in terms of narratives. These bring up certain questions, those that relate to the peasant's consciousness, who they are and if their identity forms a fracture or a composition.

MEMORY AND *SHETKARYACHA ASUD*

If we consider the work within collective memory, we must go through the work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1925) as a primary theoretical reference point. He understood "collective memory" as the shared representation of the past. His emphasis lay on looking at the importance of everyday communication within the creation of collective memories, and his interest in looking at the discourse of imagery within the historical themes resonates very well with the questions of historical representations.

For instance, Phule constructs the account of *Shetkaryacha Asud* in the form of a personal communication, where we follow the peasant to his house, we see the place where he has his meals and lies down to sleep. Through a furthering of communication between Phule and the peasant, we also come to know that the peasant had been going through a lot of difficulties since he had been unable to pay the bribe to the Brahmin official, unlike other villagers, who had then resultantly taxed the land at a greatly increased cess. We are told that there had been a shortage of rain that particular year and that at the same time, his father had died. The funerary expenses, coupled with the drought, meant that the peasant had to borrow money to meet the cess amount, with his lands pledged against the debt. The rate of interest that the moneylender had charged on the debt was so high that he was unable to pay it back, resulting in the debt being foreclosed. It was useless to resist as the bureaucracy—the moneylender and the Brahmin were all caste fellows (Phule 1969: 233–9).

Many historians are uncomfortable at Halbwach's anti-individualism. Winter and Sivan (1999) argue, "Durkheimians held tenaciously that individual memory was entirely socially determined", and, thus, we see that they write the individual off of the role within the history of collective memory. This makes Halbwachs frequently quoted, as historians try to seek distance from their role model to address one of their primary puzzles: the role of individual action in history.

In order to find answers to this end, sociologists have either tried to use "occupied" conception of collective memory, which academics have also called "social memory" (Fentress and Wickham 1992), "collective remembrance" (Winter and Sivan 1999), and "popular history making" (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998) or have refused the need for new terminology and instead opted for the old conception of the "myth" (Gedi and Elam 1996). The plethora of terms have led the scholars to develop their own expression to understand the social base or social function of the collective memory under consideration. Therefore, the discipline of memory studies has come to include terms like "national memory", "public memory", "vernacular memory", and "countermemory" (Hutton 1993).

Phule solves this problem by maintaining a personal atmosphere within his account, getting into the fabric of the history, economics, or politics he is looking at. He writes: "At last, heaving a great sigh in the midst of his tears, the cultivator fell asleep. I wiped my own eyes, and went to look outside." (Phule 1969: 233) Following this, he pens a close description of the cultivator's house, his piece of land, and elements of his domestic and social life, which when communicated with any rural popular audience would click almost instantaneously. He describes the courtyard, piles of garbage, empty jars of grain, makeshift cow pen with a few mangy cows, an old woman lying down next to the vegetable waste, a baby crying nearby and sending a trickle of water across the floor (Phule 1969: 239). The domesticity that is described within the work gradually slides into the poverty that marks its every corner, and the loss of will that accompanies it is also made evident: the unclean oven; the ashes beneath mixed with excrement from the cat; the betel juice-stained walls; the walls holding leaky stone lamps, a pair of worn out sandals, old underwear, with dust and cobwebs occupying every part of the household. Phule concludes the description with the entry of the peasant's aged mother, cursing her family's situation and the Brahmanical hegemony emerging in ancient times and being reinforced by the colonial regime that brought their honest family to their knees (Phule 1969: 233–9). What Phule is seen to be doing here is giving his audience something that they can experience within their everyday environments, but it is communicated with a polemical twist.

Much of the more engaging research in memory is seen to revolve around the term "cultural memory", which is useful to maintain and develop Halbwach's emphasis on the material basis of memory (Crewe and Spitzer 1999). Within this kind of a framework, it also useful to look at Assman's positioning of communicative and cultural memory. He places the former as a part of everyday communication that is connected to the meaning of the past characterised by contestations, resistance, instability, and non-

specialisation. Such communication has a lifespan of 80 to 100 years and are shaped strongly by contemporary events. Cultural memory"comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose cultivation serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image" (Assman 1992: 132). It is made up of objectified culture, including texts, rites, images, buildings, and monuments, which are designed to recall fateful events within the collective history.

Assman differentiates between potential and actual cultural memories as well. He posits potential cultural memory as that in which the representation of the past is stored in archives, libraries, and museums. However, it is in the mode of actuality when these representations are adopted and given new meaning within new social and historical contexts. These differences tell us that images of the past travel through a whole range of elements, including the communicative memory and the realm of actual cultural memory. But within this process, they transform depending on their intensity, social depth, and meaning (Assman 1992). His concepts remind us that notwithstanding their power to communicate concern for historical events to future generations, collective memories have a bias towards the present; they are focused on matters of time, space, and resources of communication to events that happened during the lifetimes of their producers and consumers. Lutz Niethammer (1999) locates collective memories on the side of the "floating gap" between memory and history.

In *Shetkaryacha Asud*, Phule constructs the history of caste as well life in village society but his motivation in doing so is primarily to make a political statement within his present. He, in the process, directs heavy criticism at the Brahmo Samaj and Prathana Samaj, societies for religious reform. As these organisations had a majority Brahmin membership, he considered them to be Brahmanical assertions to establish a certain kind of leadership at the provincial level. Within the organisations' ideology and control, subjugation of lower-caste groups was implicit. Phule deals with religious doctrine, social composition, and institutionalised religion through two issues of a short-lived periodical that he started in 1885 called *The Essence of Truth* (Phule 1969: 280, 294). These issues were written in the form of a communication between a Shudra and a Brahmin member of Brahmo Samaj, whom the Shudra attacks mercilessly in matters of ideology. During the course of the conversation, the Shudra asks the Brahmin about who the Samaj considered to be the true "Brahma": the one who had given the world Manu, the author of a plethora of degenerate books, or someone who the Brahmo Samajists had cleverly labelled as "Brahma", the original creator of the universe, one who had transcended all kinds of human constructs. The Brahmin argued that aim of the Samajists was to

separate truth from every religion, be it Hinduism, Christianity, or Islam, and act according to it, but later stated that they had still not arrived at any set ideology. The Shudra's reply to this brings home the fact that a strong consciousness of religious doctrine becomes the foundation of social hierarchies. Thus, we see that Phule makes use of both memory and perceived history to construct what can be called social memory, not with the sole aim to represent his material reality but also to construct a strong polemic to bring about radical social change. To further substantiate his point, he states:

> Why should we Shudras and ati-Shudras, any more than Pandita Ramabai, put any trust in what you say, until you Brahmos have prepared such a book? Because another bold trouble-maker like Parashuram or Nana Peshwa might come along at any time, and lend his weight to another devilish Brahman like Shankaracharya, who would tell us once again that everything written in the books of the Aryan Brahmans came from God: and what power would the Mangs and Mahars have to refute? (Phule 1969: 284)

Historians have been forced to reconsider the place of identities and social locations when it comes to rise in the academic pursuit of memory. While historians continue to assert that "in its demand for proof, history stands in sharp opposition to memory", there is reason to believe that the epistemological gap between history and memory is narrower than we had anticipated, as is the gap between academic and non-academic representations of the past (LaCapra 1998; Lowenthal 1985). History, then, should be conceptualised as a particular type of cultural memory, which Peter Burke puts as "neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer. In both cases, we are learning to take account of conscious or unconscious selection, interpretation and distortion. In both cases this selection, interpretation and distortion is socially conditioned" (Burke 1989: 44). Memory, when considered within history, becomes one of the more interesting theoretical challenges to the field.

Rather than fixing the problems of conceptualising the difference between history and memory theoretically, scholars have argued for a historical approach to social memory, an approach that sees these differences emerge within the present times and spaces and within particular purposes. As Matsuda (1996: 16) has tried to put it, "memory has too often become another analytical category to impose on the past; the point should be to rehistoricize memory and see how it is so inextricably part of the past."

Communication within Social Memory

We now understand memory and the way it relates to communication to exist in different paradigms, especially through the realisation that memory is not just a cognitive exercise but a phenomenon of the larger community, wherein we see the notion of community coming up. Barbie Zelizer (2001: 185) implies that memory could become a part of number of different kinds of groups—ethnic, familial, caste, or even the nation states. This kind of an understanding, as stated earlier, goes by different names, namely, public memory, cultural memory, and social memory. The difference between these labels should not be ignored as they signify variations within intellectual positionalities. Despite this, we see that the perspectives that these different names offer have their primary focus on the collective or communal nature of memory rather than its individual nature, for instance, as in the idea of a generation's memory. In Phule's time, the worry must have been how the 1857 mutiny would be remembered in the coming ages. How will the mutiny be represented to future generations? Will it be a mutiny at all? Whose history is it that will be remembered? Probably not the disadvantaged and marginal communities. Who will be the heroes of the war and who will be the villains? Whatever the particular question may be, the basic part of communication here is representation, which is at the core of how people remember. Andrea Huyssen suggests that memory is dependent on the ability to represent an event, a person, a place or an idea that one encounters: "The past is not there simply in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory" (Huyssen 1995: 3).

The example of the 1857 mutiny and the way it is deemed to be remembered should not lead us to think that collective memory and history are one and the same. Although we find similarities in its basic elements, they are indeed different at certain points, as Pierre Nora (1989: 8–9) states:

> Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to be long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what Is no longer…. Memory insofar as it is affective and magical, only affects those facts that suit it…. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism…. Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can conceive the relative.

We can then say that history is produced by historians while memory becomes a performance within social collectives. History becomes the preferred mode because of its methodological legitimacy; collective memory is seen to be an emotive and political act. One of the more basic assumptions of collective memory studies is its pragmatic nature when it seeks to look at the past within the framework of the present.

There are a number of ways in which communication, in direct or indirect ways, is said to affect the performance and reception of collective memory.

First, language forms the basis of both communication and social memory with its associated social codes and symbol systems. We live within language systems; it both predates and prefigures us. The native language or the dialect, be it Khandeshi or Konkani Marathi, allows us to take part in communicative exchanges with those who speak the same tongue. The language systems in turn carry with them parts of the past and help us in giving structure to our partial understandings of the world around us. It constructs our "truths", our history is largely shaped by the language that we come to speak. Friedrich Nietzsche ([1873] 1989: 247) put this in a way which suggested that "the legislation of language [that] enacts the first laws of truth".

As such, the importance of language in matters of history and remembering is telling. Language, thus, cannot be taken as a neutral and transparent instrument to communicate past fictions, but, in a sense, it shapes and constructs the past in many different ways. The language that we speak comes to us shaped by years of culture and economics. If we come to memorise through language then we remember politically and in certain partialities, according to resources and constraints that we may face through our use of the linguistic medium. It would also be important to note that we remember in collectivities through our languages and symbol systems.

Communication is also seen to be dependent on a number of background assumptions. It can be seen that two speakers of a common parlance must share certain cultural characteristics. For instance, within the Pune district of 1874, the words "Kunbi" and "Maratha" are synonymous in conversation because these castes are mainly in possession of the land, but on the other hand, in the districts of Solapur and Khandesh, the relationship between "Kunbi" and "Maratha" is not so simple and the presence of a number of other land-owning castes requires the usage of more accurate language. The landed castes in Solapur and Khandesh referred to themselves as Marathas and later started calling

themselves Deckhani (Sinclair 1874). These labels are a product of how we learn from and understand the past, whether they are part of our interpersonal communication or a part of our cultural history. Communication as such asserts itself on the past at least implicitly. We must come to terms with the fact that the ways we come to interpret the past are shared by our linguistic groups to a certain extent. In fact, we are seen to depend on these assumptions whenever we form communicative messages (Campbell and Jamieson 1977).

Communication is cumulative in a way that a message reconfigures that which has gone before it. This is one of the basic claims of memory studies—in which we see certain kinds of remembrances—that reconfigures our understandings of the past which is based on the politics of the present. Michel Foucault (1972: 124) argues that:

> Every statement involves a field of antecedent elements in relation to which it is situated, but which it is able to reorganize and redistribute according to new relations. It constitutes its own past, defines, in what precedes it, its own filiation, redefines what makes it possible or necessary, excludes what cannot be compatible with it. And it poses this enunciative past as an acquired truth.

Each message that becomes part of our communication thus alters the way we understand the message, the context that comes with the message, and also the kind of understanding we have for messages that have come before it. Each message thus becomes relational in the way it defines every other related message in matters of legitimacy, astuteness, ethical defensibility, soundness, or their opposites. So, the assertions that are marked within communication of the present moment intervene within its contexts, redefining and reconstructing the present and its elements. For example, in *Shetkaryacha Asud*, Phule argues that the original Kshatriyas, the ancestors of the land-owning Marathas, had, like the Aryans, come from Iran. Here, Phule is seen to construct history that would help his present political agenda. He states that they had come as friends and lived in harmony with the Shudra kingdoms already established, helping them fend off the subsequent Aryan offensives:

> The representatives of the ninety-six families from Iran each established their own kingdoms, and by all cooperating with each other they managed their political affairs without any difficulty, and so for hundreds of years there was nothing to spoil their prosperity, and in the kingdoms of the Dasyus, Astiks, Ahirs, Agras, Pisacas, and

> Matangs, all the people were very happy and the dust of gold seemed to hang in the very air. (Phule 1969: 221)

Social memory performs a cumulative function, wherein it alters our way of understanding history within the popular discourse.

Directly connected with notions of challenging hegemony in history and historiography is the fact that communication is often related to struggles over power. Communication is not just a simple act but a kind of "commodity" with a form that is known to bring about certain kinds of changes. Resultantly, communicators compete for—among other things—the power to represent the past within their own narratives and to also serve the purposes of the present.

Phule, in a collection of ballads or locally known as *pavada*s titled *Priestcraft Exposed*, talks about "who ruled and how in this blessed land of Hindustan before the Brahman conquest". In the collection, he writes of a happy community of Kshatriyas ruled by their leader King Bali and by officials called "Khandobas", prominent among whom were Bahiroba, Mhasoba, and Martand (Phule 1969: 136–7).

Within these, Phule included a number of figures, symbols, and rituals from popular religious beliefs. Phule carefully traces the general domestic practices and beliefs in his contemporary times to an idyllic pre-Aryan society. For instance, the practice of presenting a *tali* or a dish of offerings to Khandoba, he states, originated under King Bali's rule:

> When King Bali had some work of importance to devolve upon his Sardar's, he would hold a session of his court, and spread out some turmeric powder, coconut and a roll of betel leaves on a platter, and say "Whoever has the courage to take up this work should pick up this roll of betel leaves." So, the man who had the courage to see the task through would take the oath "Har, Har Mahavir", apply the turmeric to his forehead, pick up the coconut and the roll of betel leaves and raise it over his head, thus signifying his acceptance of the task. Bali would give the work to this man. Then this warrior would take Bali's orders, break up camp and move in upon the enemy. From this, the name of the rite came to be tal ucalane. The corruption of this is tali ucalne. (Phule 1969: 106–7)

Phule herein constructs a complex system of meaning and challenges in the assertions of mainstream historiography and the then-emerging field of Indology.

Conclusion

When we try to understand communication as collective memory, it allows us to look into a number of broad disciplinary phenomena encompassing interpersonal exchanges, historical texts, and popular cultural practices. It, in fact, leads to a transformation of social realities that change the context of the said communication, such as a song, a popular poem, or a folk tale, and begs us to look at history from its own right.

If we try to look at Phule's work from a collective memory perspective, it allows us a peek into a number of levels of abstractions, from the language Phule uses to write his work to the assumed genre identities the work constructs and the ways it tries to enact power. It is because of its twin-fold focus on the "what" and "how" of remembrance that it changes the contexts within which we try to construct and understand historical identities; it forces us to think about those things that have not been said and the politics behind its negation. Forgetfulness is an important operation within his construction of memory as well.

Shetkaryacha Asud gives us an opportunity to acknowledge the ways historical representations are negotiated, selective, present-oriented, and relative, all the while having the core notion that the experiences *Shetkaryacha Asud* embodies cannot be manipulated at will (Assman 1992). The work is effective in a way that it asserts "memory's imbrication within cultural narratives and unconscious processes is held in tension with an understanding of memory's relation, however complex and mediated, with history, with happenings, or even and most problematically perhaps from a postmodern perspective, with 'events'" (Radstone 2000: 10). Thus, Phule's work could be said to become a part of collective memory in opposition to history as it meets the ground between conceptualising society and social change.

In spite of a dearth of varied methods, empirical investigations of collective memories are not methodologically advanced by just an academic exercise of looking into the past with its related artefacts. As impressive as such an effort would be, it does not brings us closer to understanding the social and cultural dynamics behind the production of that particular act of collective remembrance. Interdisciplinary ambitions within humanities and social sciences should be addressed closer towards communication and cultural studies. An analysis of methods within these disciplines is likely to yield more tools to understand how collective memory is constructed in the present as well as the past.

Finally, we must try to understand the processes through which history is received, through which potential memories are converted into actual collective memories, when a large number of standard narratives and images in relation to the past is constructed and embraced. Is this the point of historical consciousness? The study of collective memories can be furthered by the process of communication between memory makers, memory users, and the accompanying discursive elements and traditions of representations. The hermeneutical triangle that is formed "implies an open dialogue between the object, the maker, and the consumer in constructing meaning" (Kwint 1999: 263). All these elements should be central concerns in analysing the actors within the histories of collective memories. This kind of an approach could also provide a framework to differentiate between the plethora of potential collective memories and the relatively lesser number of instances of successful memory construction.

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SUB\versions
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Bawarchi and *Katha*
The Production of the Urban Home

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the representation of domestic spaces in two films – *Bawarchi* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee [1972]) and *Katha* (Sai Paranjpye [1983]). The "homes" in these films are taken as "social spaces", as theorised by Henri Lefebvre, and have very specific spatial codes owing to their socio-historical contexts and to the fact that they are carefully constructed representations. Rising industrial capitalism and its allied consumer culture of the 1970s in India led to a new mode of citizenry in the urban city, as well as new forms of familial, conjugal and domestic spaces. This article textually analyses these films as works of art with embedded ideological statements and studies the way in which conflicts are set up and resolutions are put forward. The contrived nature of these conflicts and resolutions shall highlight the nature of these domestic spaces as produced social spaces, which implies labour. This labour is the work done in the transformation of the "house" to the "home" (within the film), and is analogous to the labour of the filmmaker in the contrivance required for the resolution of the plotline in the film. The effort, therefore, is to unearth the hidden labour that goes into these transformations and, thus, highlight the ideological bedrock that sustains and perpetuates the produced "home".

KEYWORDS

domestic space, Bollywood, 1970s, urban space, labour, social space, home

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Hindi cinema, the domestic space has often been an important location—both as a setting where the plot plays out as well as the very source of the conflict. The home is also the primary interface between public and personal lives. One's initiation into society begins with one's initiation into the family. Moreover, the outside world permeates into the domestic one and creates cultural, social and economic codes which impose themselves on the

physical space. Issues such as gender roles; sexual, parent–child, or master–servant relationships; aspirations and social mobility; conjugal privacy, etc., can be studied to examine larger issues.

Keeping this in mind, this paper looks at the two specific representations of domestic space in Hindi-language cinema—*Bawarchi* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee [1972]) and *Katha* (Sai Paranjpye [1983]). The 1970s were a time of turmoil for the nation in many different fields. The Nehruvian era of all-encompassing, socialist, macro reforms had mostly faded, and a new sense of nation building under Indira Gandhi was underway. The idea of the government as "*mai-baap*" (parent-protector) seemed to have given way to a new class consciousness where the citizen-as-individual was called upon to fulfil his or her role as a member of the nation (Rajagopal 2011). The personal spheres, although never free from the outside world, became markedly more enmeshed within political discourse. In this condition of urbanism, the middle-class home became a significant site.

Through tracing and studying the contrivances that play out in these films of the 1970s, the effort shall be to understand how the domestic space is produced as such in the cinematic domain. The "how" indicates both the labour and the imagination that contribute to the production of the middle-class domestic space. These processes are constructed through social relations of gender, class, or even other hierarchical social systems, but are articulated and reflected in the form of these cinematic representations grounded in the context of urban capitalism and a nascent consumer culture.

In his chapter "Social Space", Lefebvre (1974) envisions a three-pronged understanding of space: the *perceived,* the *conceived*, and then the "*lived space*". Lefebvre, thus, calls for "social space", which is at once produced by systems of meaning, symbols, and representation, and at the same time also a factor of production. He insists on looking at modern capitalism spatially through the experience as well as production of (social) space.

In his books *Rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre 2004) and *Critique of Everyday Life* (Lefebvre 1991), he focuses on the temporal experience of space, and the spatial experience of time, driving towards spatio-temporality of human experience. He points to the "rhythms" of daily life—activities that do not really have a beginning or an end, but operate in a recurring cyclical patterns with particular intervals.

If the homes in these films are *produced*, then the process of production involves relations of production. Some labour is involved in the production of the domestic space as such. If one looks at the domestic space as social space, then through the practice of it, it has its own spatial codes. This social space is thus produced, while also acting as means of production. The effort of this analysis shall be to look at how the cinema of this period produces the social space of the home and what it produces in turn.

An essential plot device in these films is the transformation of the "house to "home"—an implied labour that makes the physical space the site of the family or the community. Following from Elisabeth Bronfen (2004), the home is also associated with the danger of its loss—the feeling of not being at home or being estranged from it. This essential duality is mediated by the social themes of gender and class. Issues such as privacy, exclusion, formation of a community, formation of family, modes of masculinity and civility, and aspirations of wealth and mobility become plot devices in narratives set in an era where commodity culture and urban lifestyle is making inroads.

Through the 1970s and 1980s in India, as the Nehruvian era of the protective, parental government faded away, a new social culture based on the citizen as an urban consumer-member developed. The films, *Bawarchi* and *Katha*, are set in this socio-historical context. Rachel Dwyer (2006) distinguishes between representations of an "old middle class" and a "new middle class". She writes that while the cinema of the 1970s was about an older middle class, the cinema from there on captured the spirit and the imagination of the "new middle class"—a class that is still located within the middle class but "its consumerist lifestyle opportunities are those of the rich" (Dwyer 2006: 227). M. Madhava Prasad (1998) uses the term "middle cinema" to refer to "middle-class" cinema, and says that this "middle cinema" was part of a larger "realist programme", which also included the films of Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal. About middle-cinema, he writes,

> As spectators the audience of citizen-subjects were called upon to occupy two different positions. One corresponded to the citizen side of the entity and involved a frame of reading that included the perspective of the nation-state while the other was addressed to the subject, the individual in society, faced with the struggle for existence, the locus of desires, fears and hopes. (Prasad 1998: 162)

While the theme of class consciousness and the spectator as citizen-subject are relevant, this analysis shall not attempt to follow Prasad and Dwyer in viewing these films as realistic portrayals. In fact, the films are often self-reflexive about being works of art—while *Bawarchi* is introduced by

Amitabh Bachchan's voice as a play, with its setting and characters, *Katha* is set up as an adaptation of the fable of the hare and the tortoise.

Instead, this analysis shall employ a "symptomatic reading" of these films. Althusser (1970: 27–9) writes that such a reading highlights the assumptions and presuppositions that the text is based on, which allow for some things to be *invisible* within the text—things that cannot be thought or said in the text. These films are deliberately plotted movements from conflict to resolution, set in and affected by the domestic social space. As such, this movement from conflict to resolution is made possible by this invisiblisation of certain social themes. These social themes, which operate in the domestic space, are the subject of enquiry of this analysis.

I

Bawarchi (1972) was directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, and stars Rajesh Khanna as the titular *bawarchi* (cook), supported by Asrani, Jaya Bahaduri, and others. Like several of Mukherjee's films, *Bawarchi* is genially light-hearted in tone and set in a familial space. Like other Mukherjee films, it does not shy away from its own theatricality and performativity, and, in fact, declares itself as an enactment.

Figure 1.1: The familial house that the film is set in

The Setup

The film begins with a narrated introduction like one would see in a staged play. Amitabh Bachchan's voice announces the production house, the name of the film, its writers, cinematographers, writers, sound recorders, artists, singers, and so on. Using Amitabh Bachchan as a narrator and opening the film with a parting of the curtain declares a rejection of verisimilitude and highlights that the people that we are going to see are "actors" who are there to play certain roles. Citing the location as "any house in India" further inverts the relationship between the house and its representation, pointing to the idea that every real house, in fact, has actors who need to perform their roles to maintain the house as "home". These roles are the everyday practices of the domestic space which constitute the "social space".

This is essentially a large joint family house (Figure 1.1). In the opening shots, we see all of these characters in their own rooms engaged in regular activities. Although it is called "Shanti Niwas" (*shanti* meaning tranquillity, and *niwas* meaning residence), we are told that the house is constantly noisy and chaotic. The constant tedium of the house has made the cook run away. Fed up with his masters, he decides to leave, willing to work even for slightly lesser pay. This leads to the event that signals the crisis in the house—the morning tea is not served. All the family members blame each other for this situation. Ultimately, the responsibility falls on Krishna, the orphaned granddaughter, to make tea for everyone and restore some sense of normalcy in the house (Figure 1.6). It is also revealed that not all members of this joint family stay in this house out of choice. Kashinath and his wife want to leave but stay on so that they are not excluded from the inheritance when the patriarch dies.

Shivnath hesitates in asking his family members to do chores because the wives of his sons are "daughters-*in-law*". The "in-law" part of the relationship denies him the authority through kinship to command them to serve the house. Krishna, however, genuinely wants to live in the house—she is willing to perform household work which everyone else shirks away from. As she prepares tea for everyone and carries it around chanting "chai garam" (hot tea), we see a glimpse of the family falling back into order.

The Arrival

All of this is changed by the arrival of Rajesh Khanna's character, a bawarchi named Raghu (Figure 1.2). Shivnath comments that his arrival is like the coming of a god. Krishna rouses the whole

family to meet Raghu, and they all gather around him in the patriarch's bedroom. Raghu immediately begins to seduce the family by using his gift of the garb. Raghu is viewed with admiration by some and suspicion by other members of the family. He spins yarns and creates a religious/mythical aura around his set of kitchen implements. His demeanour reeks of overfamiliarity and flattery and sets him up as a possible conman. It is hinted through suspicion of the youngest son that Raghu might be there to swindle the family and steal the patriarch's trunk. He has the character traits of the storyteller of a bygone era, as well as the almost feudal values of what "service" means in a domestic sense. However, these values do not coincide with the general socio-economic atmosphere that the family members know is prevalent in the urban world, resulting in a suspicion that stems from the sense of him being too good to be true. Raghu begins to unify the family around him. While Krishna would take the tea to everyone individually, Raghu insists that everyone should sit together and drink tea. He thus transforms the central courtyard into a site of action (Figure 1.3). The family gathers there for meal times, etc. Gradually, the familial relations between them also start to improve. Raghu fosters love between the sons and their wives, helps them do what they want in the house without affecting other, and performs their domestic chores in their place.

Figure 1.2: The bawarchi arrives

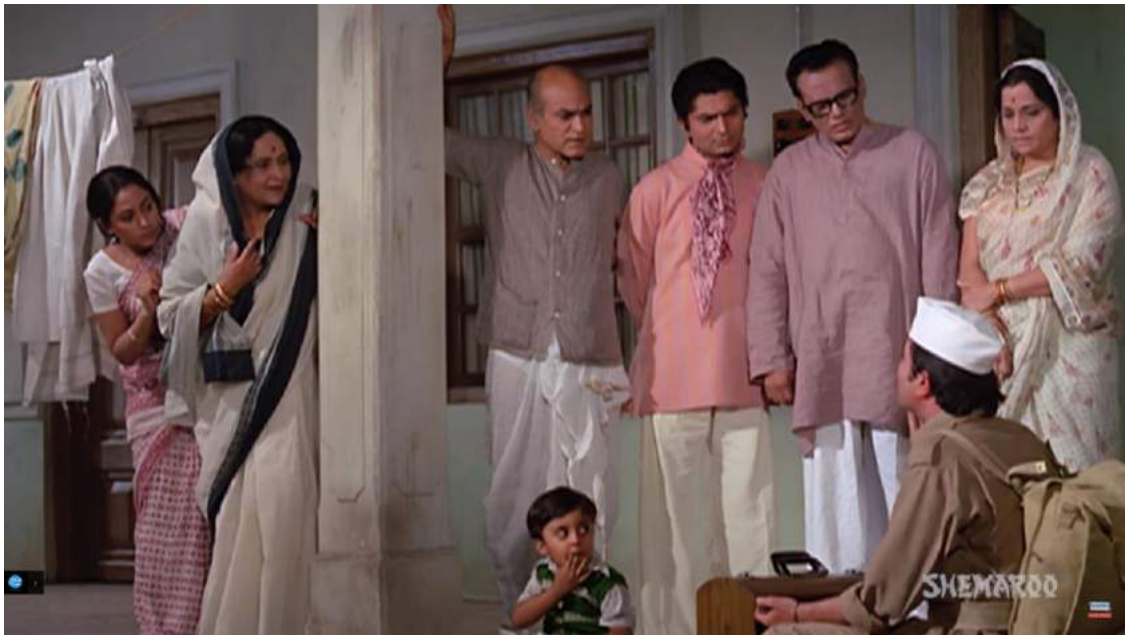

Figure 1.3: The bawarchi unites the family

He even sleeps in the central courtyard and has become a sort of a domestic deity. The song "Bhor Aai Gaya Andhiyaara" shows the whole family coming together and celebrating in the centre of the house (Figure 1.4). Even the patriarch, who rarely leaves the room, is out singing. At the centre of it all is Raghu, the bawarchi. As soon as this crescendo of familial harmony ends, the event that has been foreshadowed throughout the film happens— he steals the contents of the patriarch's trunk and disappears. The suspicion of the family members and the audience alike seem to have come true.

The Twist

However, in the plot twist, it is revealed that Raghu manufactured the elaborate ploy of stealing the trunk and absconding, so that Krishna's love interest, Arun, could claim to have caught and stopped him and return the stolen items, thereby winning the favour of the whole family. At the end of the film, it is revealed that Raghu's true identity is that of a professor in disguise. Discontent with the knowledge, wisdom, and skill that he had amassed, he finally arrives at the realisation that true happiness can only be found through love, and he makes it his mission to share and spread love in the world. To do this, he seeks out dysfunctional homes where people have material wealth but have lost love for each other. He enters these houses as a servant, a cook, etc., and he does not teach them anything new—only about the love that they have forgotten. When Krishna

requests him to stay on at their house, he replies by saying that there is a moral imperative that he must now follow, and go to another house and fix it. The narrator's voice closes the film by hoping that the house that Raghu visit's next is not the viewers'.

Figure 1.4: Still from the song "Bhor Aai Gaya Andhiyaara"

This exposition is essentially a critique of the lost "love" in urban life. Material concerns have denigrated the ideal of the joint family, and Raghu sets out to correct this. However, it is crucial to note the method that the narrative employs for this correction. Raghu—a man of privilege, equipped with modern knowledge and culture, chooses the role of the servant. He offers a version of labour that is alien to the family—not only does he ask for less pay than offered, he also does many more tasks than that are asked of him. This is in complete opposition to the previous cook, who leaves the house at the beginning of the film due to adverse working conditions. He is willing to sacrifice his pay to get away from the constant dysfunction of the domestic space, even if it means going to work in a restaurant. This is a form of labour the urban audience would be more familiar with—the worker who works for remuneration or compensation. The purely transactional nature of the relationship between the master and the servant is the norm in the socio-economic structures on which urbanism is built. The "masterless men", uprooted from the rural economy and migrated to the city, have broken away from the traditional moral imperatives and compulsions

and have the agency (at least in theory) to choose the best mode of employment available to them. When the cook leaves, no one in the family is actually surprised.

The task that Raghu has cut out for himself, however, is not based on providing labour in an economic transaction. He is instead harking back to an older tradition of "duty" that the servant performs for the master. The "Ramu kaka" figure that is often seen in Indian cinema has parallels with Raghu's character. Both are entities from a tradition where the servant was an organic part of the master's household. The servant thus has to perform emotional labour in addition to the physical labour that he is paid for. Raghu has identified the daily rhythms like making tea and snacks, mixing drinks for the eldest son, and so on. However, his constant flattery, compliments, unsolicited advice, and moral lessons of familial goodness are also part of a rhythm of emotional labour that has to be performed by someone. If, in the modern capitalist, the concept of "care" has become reified and commodified into a "service", then Raghu's efforts are to take this economic value away from this labour and give it an almost divine value. In the film, the family members compare his arrival to the coming of a god. To add to this, he carries a box of ladles (Figure 1.5) with him which he claims to have been a gift of the goddess Annapurna. At one point, he also mentions that doing housework should not be considered "work" at all, but a fundamental spiritual duty that fosters love and care.

Figure 1.5: Raghu's divine ladles

The domestic space of the joint family in *Bawarchi* is produced as social space, which implies that someone has to put resources and labour into it. While it is clear that the labour is provided by Raghu, it must be noted that it is not recognised as such. The exploitative nature of the work that the servant is expected to provide is normalised through codes of religion and morality. While it might grant the servant divine status, it also imposes a religious imperative, leaving him susceptible to exploitation. Embedded in the practice of domestic space are codes of oppression and exploitation, which, in turn, are perpetuated. The work that the servant has to provide is hidden behind problematic ideas of family and community. It is not, in fact, the organic lived experience of the joint urban family itself that produces the social space, but the physical and emotional labour provided by the servant.

Figure 1.6: Krishna has to take up Raghu's role

II

Sai Paranjpye's *Katha* was released in 1983. The film stars Naseeruddin Shah, Farooq Shaikh, and Deepti Naval, and is based in a *chawl* in urban Mumbai. The chawl originally came up as a communal housing structure for textile mill workers in Mumbai. However, by the 1970s and 1980s, the chawl had become the domain of the lower-middle class. It had a sort of liminal position between community housing and private housing. It had the character of collective housing, while also allowing for private quarters for individuals and nuclear families. *Katha* is based on a Marathi

play by G. Sathye titled *Sasa aani Kasav*, meaning "the hare and the tortoise". This reference to the old fable is a major part of the film too, which begins with an animated sequence based on it.

Figure 2.1: The animated opening sequence

The Fable

Katha begins with an animation of the story of the hare and the tortoise (Figure 2.1). The title "*Katha*" implies a fable—a parable of good and bad. In the original tale, the tortoise wins on the basis of his "steadiness". However, in the film's version, the hare flits through the race, stopping in places to eat carrots, flirt with other animals, and ultimately piggybacks on the tortoise itself and jumps in front of him at the finish line.

This initial comment on the "change of times" sets the tone for the film, which itself is a play on the old fable. The change that is the subject of this film is in the system of morality, ethics, and basic human relationships, which have been brought about by a movement from the old times to the "present times". The tradition of storytelling itself belongs to a certain time, period, and place. With the onset of city life and urban experience, these values cannot be used as are for the perpetuation of the urban experience and, hence, need to be reconstituted with a different functionality so that they can be used as a means towards an end. When the grandmother stresses the importance of "image" one puts forth of oneself, it is because of the importance of representations in the urban world. One does not need to be a hard worker as long as one is "seen

to be" a hard worker. But also inherent in this comment on the "new way of life" is a condemnation of it and, hence, it is a moral tale.

The reference to the fable serves as a sort of epigraph to the film, and after that, the physical setting of the film—the Mumbai chawl—is introduced. As Rajaram (Naseeruddin Shah) enters the chawl, there is a group of children playing cricket in the central courtyard. He climbs the staircase to the upper floors while announcing to everyone that he has become "permanent" (at his job). As he enters the door, he hails his mother and father. At this point, we find that he lives alone in the room, and the parents he refers to are photographs on the wall. Next, his neighbour Sandhya enters the scene. Rajaram is visibly smitten by her. She goes on to help him put up a new name plate, which he has been saving for the day he becomes permanent. This name plate has a sliding panel of wood which indicates if he is "in" or "out". Everyone suddenly sees it and they all gather around to appreciate his promotion as well as the name plate (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: Rajaram celebrates his promotion and new name-plate

The nature of the chawl is like that of a very large joint family. It is not clear what the blood relations between the people are. The grandmother, the mother, the "bapu", the sister-in-law, all seem to belong to the same family in their interactions with each other. Even the bickering seems to be a part of the organic continuum of the chawl. Rajaram's parents are in the village, but he has even found proxy parents in the form of "bapu" and "maaji" in the chawl. He seems to serve them

with the same devotion that a son would. There is also a generally accepted lack of privacy in the chawl. The couple, complaining mutedly about privacy, are only heard through a closed window and are never in the frame themselves. Moreover, the residents of the chawl drift in and out of each other's quarters without much thought. The spatial code of the chawl does not have any strict protocol of entry and exit or of personal territory. Sandhya happens to be in Rajaram's house without him inviting her, or she herself worrying about it too much. It is understood that she would bring him tea in the evening.

As Rajaram enters, he is eager to let everyone know that he is now "permanent". The fact that he is celebrating permanence or stability is an indication of his character, as well of the social universe he inhabits. The recognition that he desires is within the space of the chawl. He already has a name plate made for the day where his private and public lives can come together in a state of stability. The first step to this was to get a permanent job and the second step is to propose marriage to Sandhya. Even his name plate is a marker of the bureaucratic office—the sliding panel shows if he's in or out. He has the naivety of a character like Don Quixote—a man out of time, who is on a civilising mission. He even has an old grandfather's clock that does not work anymore—a sign of Rajaram's temporal stasis.

Figure 2.3: Bashudev arrives

The Outsider

It is at this point, just as people gather around Rajaram to admire his success, that there is the entry of an outsider into the chawl (Figure 2.3). The "*baahar ka aadmi*" is Bashudev, Rajaram's old friend.

Figure 2.4: The chawl breaks out into song and dance, united by the arrival of Bashudev

The arrival of Bashudev acts as a major interruption in the daily machinations of the chawl. He is an outsider and instantly becomes the object of fascination and curiosity. Bashudev treats the chawl very differently from how Rajaram treats it. When he enters this space, he surveys it. His gaze is totalising—he tries to see the chawl as a single unit, a sum of its parts. As he ascends to Rajaram's quarters, he completely ignores the fascination of other people. At this point, he makes no effort to interact with the residents around him. When inside the quarters, we see that his mannerism and behaviour are also very different from Rajaram. He uses words like "enchanted", he smokes cigarettes, wears T-shirts, and says that he has been in England for a while. He has now returned to "conquer Mumbai". If Rajaram is a man displaced in time, trying to be part of a community, then Bashudev is a person who has never been grounded in space and time. He is, even in the ontological sense of the word, an outsider. Bashudev's way of life is based around the gift of the gab—he is a sweet-talker who can weave yarns and charm people by adapting his mannerisms and behaviour to their liking, as well as falsifying his own narrative.

This difference is made even starker in the different ways in which Rajaram and Bashudev manage to procure tea. When Rajaram goes around the chawl looking for milk for tea, he overhears a woman complaining about a cat, a couple getting intimate, and so on. He finally ends up in the invalid old man's room. The man readily agrees to give him milk, but he also asks Rajaram to help him sit up, put eye drops in his eyes, switch on the radio, and write a postcard. By the time he returns to Bashudev with the milk, he finds that his friend has already arranged for tea to be brought to him by another neighbour. The plot is then interrupted by a song based around the lyric "Kaun Aaya" (Who has come). During the song, the camera pans across the various parts and residents of the chawl. This also includes the cats, monkeys, and parrots. Along with the balconies of the chawl, the song also shows glimpses of the diverse interior spaces. One woman is making lassi, another is praying, a man is watering plants, a couple is sitting on a sofa, and so on. At the end of the song, all the members of the chawl can be seen dancing in the centre courtyard and the balconies (Figure 2.4).

Rajaram goes around the chawl, negotiates its idiosyncrasies, and operates within its own economy of exchange. To get milk from the old man, he has to operate within the symbolic father–son relationship where he calls him "bapu". As a "son" figure, he must also perform the duties of one. Rajaram hence exchanges his labour—both emotional and physical—for a cup of milk. He is dependent on the spatial code of the chawl for his existence. Not only must he abide by it, he must also perpetuate it. On the other hand, Bashudev only has to complement a neighbour and her son to get her to make tea for him. Bashudev has recognised the social economics of the chawl, and very calculatingly exploits it for his own advantages. He knows that in appearing like a cultured and westernised man-of-taste, he can force himself into the social structure of chawl in a way that he does not materially have to provide anything except the labour of imagination. He exchanges tea for the images he conjures up for both himself and others. These images take the form of compliments about others, inflated fictional representations of himself, and so on. The outsider recognises the simulacra of symbols and images that structure the space, and he alters this system to carve a space for himself. At the end of this scene, when all the residents start singing the song about the newcomer, it is with a sense of excitement and joy. Bashudev manages to agitate the class aspirations of the chawl as a whole into a state of carnivalesque giddiness, which sublimates in song and dance. The mundanity of the everyday life in the chawl is broken by the arrival of Bashudev, but simultaneously, this anomaly is being reabsorbed into the system when we see the people going about their daily tasks towards the end of the song.

Bashudev slowly befriends the residents and gets himself invited to the quarters of a couple. The couple proudly shows him their "imported TV" (placed inside a wooden cabinet with photos of Indian sculptures plastered across it); a big, modern, fully stocked fridge; their folding table and folding partitions; and so on (Figure 2.5). They inform him that all of these luxuries have been set up by their son, who is a doctor in Canada. Bashudev compliments their house and appreciates that their non-resident Indian (NRI) son has not forgotten Indian tradition. The man replies that although their son wants them to move to Canada, "Once one has lived in a chawl, one can't live anywhere else." He then elaborately opens the folding table, and they drink "chilled beer". Meanwhile, Rajaram is at a bus station, struggling to get people to stand in a queue, and raging at people's lack of "civic sense".

Figure 2.5: The TV set placed like an idol in a temple

This sequence brings two important things to light. The first of these is the increasing signs of commodification in the domestic space. Even though Rajaram is a model of moral propriety and strongly grounded in traditional values, he has also absorbed and internalised the consumption of commodities. He has already fetishised consumption of cigarettes and beer by limiting it to special occasions and birthdays. Similarly, in the quarters of the couple, there are several different types of imported luxuries. Like Baudrillard (1968: 16) says, these commodities have become "household gods" in the domestic space. The way that the man opens the cabinet to show the TV has very obvious visual parallels with the *mandir* (temple) that most Indian households have. There is also a ritualistic nature of opening, closing, and using these commodities. It is also useful to note that

these commodities have been made possible through the link with the West (Canada). In the limited living space available in the chawl, when the folding table is unfolded and the cans of "chilled beer" are cracked open, the theatre of the middle-class chawl is in motion. The urban chawl in Mumbai, therefore, is not a community based on old and traditional values alone. It has encountered the unfamiliar—often alienating—urbanness of the city, and assimilated it into its everyday spatial praxis.

Figure 2.6: Rajaram tries to civilise people at the bus station

In the city itself, however, is Rajaram struggling at a bus station. Outside the chawl, Rajaram is like a fish out of water. Like Don Quixote, he tries to "civilise" the unruly crowd into getting into a line and wait for the bus (Figure 2.6) and accuses them of not having "civic sense". However, it looks more like Rajaram himself is unfamiliar with the actual spatial code of the chaotic city. When Bashudev is at the same bus stop later in the film, he manages to get on the bus with ease. The "civic sense" that Rajaram lives by is an idealistic spatial vision, based on values of law and order in a civil and modern world. It is devoid of real-world considerations of how the city actually functions. It is no wonder then, that his boss tells him that he does not understand art—the practice of images. On the other hand, Bashudev has no regard for the "civic sense" that Rajaram endorses. When a government survey official mistakes him for Rajaram, he does not correct him, and promptly gives false details for the national survey—an action that, for Rajaram, would amount to disrupting the national machinery and, hence, blasphemous. Bashudev, however, does not do this for any discernible profit or advantage, rather only to amuse himself.

Rajaram's world is rapidly being taken over by Bashudev, but he fails to see that he is being conned. Having already taken over Rajaram's bed and adorned the walls with his own posters, Bashudev even takes Rajaram's savings from his always open almirah. Eventually, things begin to boil over as Rajaram's boss finds out that Bashudev has had an affair with his wife, while simultaneously also seducing Sandhya—Rajaram's love interest. Sandhya's parents visit Rajaram and ask him to request Bashudev to marry their daughter. Rajaram is heartbroken but agrees. Preparations for the wedding begin at the chawl and the whole community is involved in them. On the wedding day, Bashudev absconds. Sandhya's parents then request Rajaram to marry her instead, and Sandhya reveals that she might be pregnant with Bashudev's child. Rajaram claims that he has always loved her and accepts the marriage. The celebrations in the chawl resume, and it is indicated that Bashudev has left the country.

This trajectory shows how the "hare" and the "tortoise" have fared in the world. After conquering the chawl, Bashudev spreads his wings further and cons his way into a different domestic space—that of Rajaram's boss. Meanwhile, Rajaram grows gradually more alienated from his own social space in addition to the world outside. Bashudev has bent the social fabric of the chawl to an extent that cannot be maintained. Till now, Bashudev has been a cypher—he has taken on positions and signification as per whatever benefitted him or gave him pleasure. When the prospect of marriage ambushes him, along with his affair being found out by Rajaram's boss, his situation becomes untenable. At that point, it is obvious that Bashudev is going to run away. Rajaram, however, fails to see this. His excessive goodness is little more than naivety in the urban world, and it ultimately threatens to destroy his social universe. However, the plot of the film still offers him a chance to redeem himself as well as the values he holds dear. His act of agreeing to marry Sandhya, despite the possibility of her being pregnant with another man's child, affords him a chance to restore order to his world. By returning to a traditional code of masculinity—one that promotes gendered chivalry and gallantry as the markers of "civility"—Rajaram manages to avert the disruption and destruction of the social space of the chawl.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

If one compares Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Bawarchi* with Sai Paranjpye's *Katha*, there are some thematic similarities. While *Katha* is set in a chawl, which functions like an extended family, *Bawarchi* is set in the house of an actual joint family. Both of them have the arrival of the outsider—in *Katha*

it the protagonist's friend Bashu, while in *Bawarchi*, it is a cook. Both these characters are set up as possible conmen who flatter the residents and manage to become the centre of attention.

The difference is that in the case of *Bawarchi*, Raghu enters a domestic space that is in turmoil. He utilises the passive suspicion of the family members to set himself up as a conman, and ultimately create a crisis (the theft), which can be resolved (by someone else) and, hence, return peace, order, and love to the household. After all of this, the outside agent must leave the space that he has transformed. In *Katha,* Bashu enters a space that already has peace and a harmonic order in place. In this case, he exploits the passive naivety of his friend—the gullible Rajaram—to reap benefits from the chawl.

It is also necessary to look at the exact method that Raghu uses in *Bawarchi* for his goal of reminding the family of the love that exists between them. Like *Katha's* Rajaram, he too is on a mission, but the mission is not to "civilise" in the urban sense of the word. Raghu's aim is to return the chaotic and dysfunctional family to its idealised form that is only found in stories of bygone times. The "house" that is transformed into "home" through "love" is the essential idea he works with.

In *Katha,* on the other hand, the domestic space is produced as social space through the labour performed by Rajaram, acknowledged only through the concept of the familial duty transposed and adapted to the urban space of the chawl. Just like the Rajaram's labour, the chawl also assimilates markers of consumerism and modernity into its environs. When the outsider, Bashudev, causes a crisis by upending the spatial praxis of the chawl, it is only through a gendered and uneasy resolution—that of turning to a pre-urban model of chivalric masculinity—that the crisis is resolved.

In fact, the epilogue of *Katha* offers a self-reflexive critique of its resolution—as the fable of the hare and the tortoise ends, the old grandmother who was narrating the tale makes another appearance. This time, the tortoise has won, but the grandmother says, "What sort of victory is this?" This comment undercuts not only the overzealous and arrogant masculinity embedded in Rajaram's chivalry, but also the nature of resolutions that these films posit.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this analysis of *Bawarchi* and *Katha* was to highlight the ways in which domestic space is produced in these films. In both films, there is a central tension between the idea of the

house—the actual physical space that constitutes the place of living—and home—the social space that is a result of a transformation of the physical space through some form of "work" done. They feature the entry of an agent from *outside* the domestic space who affects, or threatens to affect, a transformation with regard to the aforementioned binary. In *Katha*, the external agents threaten to upend the internal order and destroy the social relationships and spatial codes that make "home" what it is. In *Bawarchi*, on the other hand, the external agent acts as the force that brings together the segregated parts of the house into the unified entity—"home".

The Urban Home

The fact that the domestic sphere is a crucial space for such interventions brings one back to the subject of home with the advent of urban modernity and its allied consumerism. Home as the site of private consumption is essential to the functioning of urban capitalism. This concept is articulated strikingly through the use of tea as an essential plot point in both the films. In *Bawarchi*, the conflict arises because the morning tea has not been served, and is resolved by the re-establishment of "tea time" as a ritual family practice. The bawarchi is instrumental in making the house becoming a home through unifying spatial codes like gathering for meals and tea. In *Katha*, the procurement of tea becomes a key plot device through which the social economics of the chawl is illustrated. Commodity culture has seeped into the chawl and become normalised such that the procurement of tea involves an elaborate ritual of labour exchange that has replaced familial codes. Rajaram has established the chawl as his family and himself as the son of the chawl in a way that assimilates consumption into the spatial code of the community. The arrival of Bashudev and the way in which he short-circuits this spatial code, manipulating it to his advantage by procuring tea through flattery.

Labour and Imagination

Hence, the domestic realms in these films are held together by an elaborate ritualised practice, a practice which involves two aspects—labour and imagination. These two are the work that goes into the production of domestic spaces, and both must be done simultaneously for "home" to be possible. For Rajaram to be at home in the chawl, he must perform all the ritualised labour expected from him, while also imagining himself as the "civilised" modern citizen, successful both as a private and public individual. In *Bawarchi*, it is the elevation of the domestic labour provided by the servant to a pseudo-spiritual duty, to the extent that he must also provide emotional labour and himself as a member of the family and not just a servant. The film promotes the concept of

"working for the home" as not just work done for remuneration but as a familial duty with almost divine sanction.

In the context of the modern city, this "home" has to sustain the onslaught of urbanism, which entails the industrial economy and its markers—consumerism, working-class insecurities, limited spaces, and so on. However, as the alternate ideal of communal spaces within the city—such as the joint family or the chawl—arise, there is the tendency to romanticise these spaces, too, as successful negotiations of urbanity that manage to adapt and provide shelter—physical, emotional, and social—from the oppressive machinations of the city.

These domestic spaces are not as tidily and organically successful as they appear on the surface. It is only through specific channels of labour that are based on very particular social relations that the home is successfully produced. When this labour goes unrecognised—obfuscated or subsumed into uneasy categories such as that of the "duty-bound servant", the "good daughter", or the "good son"—the result is a narrative structured on problematic social realities. The mental and emotional labour that the servant is obliged to provide because of the promotion of familial work as divine duty is hidden and obfuscated by the happy resolution of *Bawarchi*. Moreover, after the servant leaves, the work seems to be inherited by the orphaned daughter by default. This assumption is treated naturally, but is, in fact, a gendered and hierarchical assumption. In *Katha*, Rajaram emerges as a sacrificing hero willing to forego the ideal life he has planned for himself, in order to act as the honourable knight who saves the maiden in distress by doubling up on chivalric masculinity. These tensions offer commentary on the gendered and hierarchical nature of the social relations, but can get buried under the neat resolutions that the film narratives offer.

These resolutions have been engineered on the basis of the popular imagination—with the assumption that the spectator shall find the resolution plausible. Inherent in this mechanism is a *jump*—the film intends to make the spectator bypass thinking about the crisis itself, and move directly from the crisis to the posited resolution without thinking of it is as uneasy. The spectator's function of imagination and analysis of the crisis is, hence, bypassed by the narrative, which takes upon itself the task of imagining the resolution out of the crisis and positing it as natural and organic, even if it is not actually so. Through an Althusserian symptomatic reading of these films, these assumptions and symbols are uncovered and are understood to constitute the ideological framework of the texts. This framework allows for the "unthinkable"—the obfuscated, hidden labour—to exist beneath the domestic social space represented in these films.

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SUB\versions
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Narrative of the Native
In the Time of Neoliberal Fundamentalism

Ayushi Bengani

ABSTRACT

The Jungle Book has been screened several times since it was first written by Rudyard Kipling in 1894. Jon Favreau's 2016 film adaptation marks another moment in the text's commanding presence in the cinematic world. Produced by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, the film set unprecedented records world over, especially in the subcontinent.

Global media giants like Disney see a tremendous marketing opportunity in their theatrical re-releases of films based on folk tales set in the Third World. In their attempt to go local, they uniquely design the film's distribution and exhibition strategies around colonial narratives, mythological representations, and cultural practices entrenched in these texts so that the film resonates with the regional audiences and their primordial identities.

Taking *The Jungle Book* (2016) as an entry point, the paper looks at multiple global-local flows operative in the process of globalisation in developing countries like India, riding on which cultural industries like Disney reiterate their global dominance.

KEYWORDS

Disney, globalisation, Bollywood

INTRODUCTION: *THE JUNGLE BOOK*

It is the same old story of man's search for identity. It has been reproduced cinematically several times now. It will most likely continue to, given that it holds the promise of "showing nature,

showing animals—and really getting into that deep, mythic imagery, that always marries well with technology", as shared by *The Jungle Book* (2016) director Jon Favreau (Faraci 2016).

Said to be based on Disney's 1967 film and Rudyard Kipling's 1894 book, Favreau's *The Jungle Book* (2016) had posters of "endangered" Bengal Tiger Shere Khan and Asian elephant Hathi, among others, as part of its social media marketing before the release (Adnews 2016).

The first poster that came out had a temple in the background, a snake climbing down from a banyan tree on the side, and monkeys herding around in the front of the temple causeway. Another poster had a python against the backdrop of surreal mist, and yet another had a herd of Bengal Elephants marching through sunlight falling on the jungle.

The tapestry created arouses subtle sensations of mysteriousness and ancientness of the jungles of India. These images revel in the colonial postulation of cultural essences about the land of snakes and temples, the land which is timeless, unchangeable and mythical—repeated themes that constitute the concept of orientalism as defined by Edward Said.

At the trailer launch of the film's Hindi version in India, the film was unanimously promoted on account of *The Jungle Book* being "an Indian story" (Bhushan 2016). This is obvious considering that the story is set in India and written by the India-born British author Rudyard Kipling. The allegories drawn by Kipling from the dominant languages, folklores, landscapes, wildlife, people and practices that popularly represent the Indo-Gangetic region of the country further add to the text's celebration of "Indianness".

Scholars of Kipling have pointed out that it is primarily through animals native to Indian subcontinent that the moral essence of the subcontinent was conveyed. The glorifying depiction of elephants as "the creators of the jungle", wolves as "the leaders of the pack", bears as "the teachers of the law", made them appear like gods and kings, adding to the imagery of a living yet mythological jungle (see McClure 1981; Sullivan 1993).

Also present at the trailer launch, Vishal Bhardwaj, who composed the song with lyricist Gulzar for the 1993 TV serial *The Jungle Book*, recollected a success story of the popular track. "I remember on 26th January *Gantantra Diwas* (Republic Day) parade, there was a *jhanki* (tableau) which had *Chaddi pahan ke phool khila hai* (a flower has bloomed wearing underwear). So it became like a national anthem in those days," he said (Movie Talkies 2016).

With its themes of Indian family and forest, the Hindi song "*chaddi pahan ke phool khila hai*" resonated so well with the audiences that it became a paean of praise for India and its Indian roots.

The film opens with a culturally diverse land where animals of all colours, sizes and shapes get together peacefully, unlike in Disney's 1967 rendition of the text. The land, however, is climactically won over by a great leader, who is born with the gift of Red Flower (that helps him trace his bloodline and realise his full potential), and is bowed to as a god and adored as a brother (Kipling's idea of an ideal imperial ruler).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DISNEY AND THE GLOBALISATION GAME

Time and again, Disney's idyllic world has been extensively studied as reeking of cultural privilege, class hierarchy, and one-man leadership, in both on-screen narratives and off-screen practices. Critical theorists have pointed out Disney's bigoted representation of cultural minorities and market monopoly as representative and reproductive of global capitalism and fascism (see Artz 2003; Dorfman & Mattelart 1975; Wasko 2001).

The Jungle Book has been explicitly critiqued for both Kipling's (1894) and Disney's (1967) imperialist propaganda. However, the effects and true dimensions of such cultural imperialism are nonetheless much more ambiguous and complex to ascertain than we might believe. One, the consumption of these Euro-American cultural products in "the rest" of the world hardly entails a passive acceptance of the imperialist images "hidden" in them. Two, the reproduction of a certain kind of cinema in certain geographies is rooted in deeper social relationships than that revealed by textual analysis of films.

Culture, as we see, is very deeply connected to the historical construction of identity in relation to the state. Arjun Appadurai (1996) explains the cultural dimensions of globalisation by examining how transnational flows of capital, ideas, and people increasingly shape the cultural politics of the global modern nation states. According to him, globalisation, far from blurring boundaries of nation states, is increasingly elevating the concept of a nation as the treasury of a singular ancient culture. His understanding of the concepts of culture and cultural difference, and ethnicisation of identities and transnational globalisation informs the paper to take an inward and multidirectional gaze on the text rather than the mainstream unidirectional model of the Euro-American domination.

Taking on the discourse of globalisation on the national scale, Arvind Rajagopal (2004) points out the role of Indian media in facilitating the rise of cultural fundamentalism with the emergence of economic liberalisation at the turn of the twenty-first century. He argues that the commonality between the seemingly contradictory forces of nation state and free market lay in their technologies of transmission for expanding markets and audiences. The then rapid consumption of mediatised images of Hinduism gives historical context to the contemporary image reproduction of "the ancient India" by the dominant national media industries on a global scale.

Scholars like Yan and Santos (2009) call this reinforcement of the Western-created myths of the Orient by the Orient "self-Orientalism". Described as "a reconfiguration and, in many ways, an extension of Orientalism" (Yan and Santos 2009: 297) the theory of "self-Orientalism" proposes that Orientalism is not merely the autonomous construction of the West, but is one in which the unchanging, essential Orient itself engages in its own construction, reproduction, and perpetuation. The concept complicates the reading of cultural imperialism in the postcolonial media flows and redirects attention to "regional" systems of domination that contribute to the increasingly economised "son of the soil" narrative.

The repeated reproductions of texts such as *The Jungle Book*, which have the narrative of the native at its core, explain and reinstate a popular culture of primordial sentiments, riding on which global media corporations increasingly sustain and strengthen their dominance at global-local levels. The

resultant reproduction of a selective film form and content further elevates centralisation and metropolitan hegemony within cinema.

Borrowing on the above conceptual frameworks of cultural studies and political economy, the paper deals with the idea of self-determination outside the unidirectional model of Euro-American domination and argues for the complex nature of the postcolonial media flows. Using *The Jungle Book* (2016) as an entry point, it discusses the globalisation strategies of Hollywood and Bollywood across the cinematic practices of production, distribution, and exhibition.

HOLLYWOOD BLOCKBUSTER

The Jungle Book (2016) has been hailed for setting new marketing, localisation, and box office standards for Hollywood films in India, as shared by Amrita Pandey, vice president, Studios, Disney India (Ramachandran 2016). Before we look into the factors that contribute to making a Hollywood film a regional success, it is important to understand what makes a Hollywood film a global success.

Examining the global presence of Hollywood films such as *Jurassic Park*, *Planet of the Apes*, *The Lord of the Rings*, Steven Prince (2003) points out that Hollywood's ascendancy worldwide is created, sustained, and enhanced through a certain profile of films that is popularly called "Hollywood Blockbuster". Prominent characteristics of this profile are huge costs of film production and marketing, appeal of spectacle and hyperbolic visual effects, and revenue maximisation from film-based product licensing and merchandising.

Companies like Disney and Time Warner are pioneers in Hollywood Blockbuster since its development in the 1970s when the big studios turned their focus from stand-alone hits to franchises, or what Thomas Schatz has called "calculated mega films designed to sustain a product line of similar films and an ever-expanding array of related entertainment products" (Claverie 2016: 2).

Two studios, Universal and Disney, controlled more than 41 per cent of US domestic box office and a third of global gross collections in 2015. Much like Paramount, Disney released 11 films in 2015, but what gave it an upper hand in revenues are its pre-branded blockbusters that include superhero, fantasy, action, and sci-fi themes. "Our titles this year were part of the movie going culture before they even came out", said Disney worldwide distribution chief Dave Hollis (McClintock 2016).

In 2019, Disney led the global box office with *Captain Marvel*, *Avengers: Endgame*, and *Aladdin*, each crossing $1 billion and together accounting for 50 per cent of the overall gross for the summer season (Lee 2019). What's important to note is that none of their successes come from original properties. It indicates how the conglomerate has grown in the last decade.

While *Avatar* (2009) marked the first big Hollywood hit at Indian box office (Box Office India 2019a), the record breaking businesses of *Avengers* and *Iron Man* franchises in India testify to the growing popularity of the blockbuster form in the country. For instance, the top five Hollywood earners of 2015 in India were *Furious 7*, *Jurassic World*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*, and *Terminator Genisys*, as reported by KPMG India– Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry's [FICCI's] (2017) Indian media and entertainment industry report.

Film trade analysts have pointed out that Hollywood's growth in India has been facilitated by their localisation strategies such as dubbing in regional languages and roping in regional stars for regional versions. In the last five years, about 40 per cent of English film releases are dubbed in at least one local language in India, and regional dubbed releases in Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu constitute up to 50–60 per cent of Hollywood revenue in India (Bhushan 2017).

With its acquisition of UTV Motion Pictures in 2012, Disney has its foot firmly set in India, so much so that the top four highest grossing Hollywood titles of all time in India belong to Disney and from the last four years alone: *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *The Jungle Book* (2016), and *The Lion King* (2019).

The Disney–UTV combination today ranks in the top film studios of the country. It leads in local production capacities in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam, as well as brand licensing business in India across merchandising, publishing, gaming, broadcasting, and streaming, among others.

In the recent past, they had Varun Dhawan dubbing for *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) in Hindi, Priyanka Chopra and Irrfan Khan for *The Jungle Book* (2016) in Hindi, Ranveer Singh for *Deadpool 2*'s (2018) Hindi trailer, South superstar Rana Daggubati for *Avengers: Infinity War's* (2018) Telugu dub, Shahrukh Khan for *The Lion King* (2019) in Hindi, and Aishwarya Rai Bachchan for *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) in Hindi, among others.

Recent Disney releases have also had regional song compositions for promotion in India. Vishal Dadlani's Hindi remake of the song "Bare Necessities" into "*Yeh Zaruratein*", Gulzar and Vishal Bhardwaj's remake of their old rendition "*Chaddi Pehen Ke Phool Khila Hai*" for *The Jungle Book* (2016), Hindi disco king Bappi Lahiri's song "*Shona*" for *Moana* (2016), and Punjabi Hindi rapper-singer Badshah's song "*Sab Sahi Hai* Bro" for the Hindi version of *Aladdin* (2019) are some examples.

In terms of their collections, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) saw 45 per cent, *The Jungle Book*'s (2016) 58 per cent, and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) 41 per cent of their Indian revenues from dubbed versions (Bhushan 2017). With such high returns on dubbing films that are high on budgets and special effects, investment in regional dubs is on the rise.

It is only such Hollywood films that are packed with fantasy narratives, action sequences, and visual effects that make a significant impact at the box office. Apart from its localised marketing strategies, the Hollywood Blockbuster's growth in India has also been attributed to the multiplex boom in the country.

BOLLYWOOD HERO

Hollywood spectacles have immensely benefited from newer exhibition spaces like multiplexes that have emerged in the post-liberalisation period (see Box Office India 2016a). For instance, it

was heralded as a great move by Disney to not release *The Jungle Book* (2016) in non-2K cinemas in India, as reported by Box Office India (2016b). Similarly, a majority of the people who watched *The Lion King* (2019) went to the top four cinema chains of India: PVR, Inox, Carnival, and Cinepolis (Box Office India 2019b).

Backed with high-technology projection systems and quality infrastructure, these new spaces of exhibition offer the audiences "a fully immersive, larger than life, entertaining experience" of films that "the whole family can watch and enjoy together," posited Siddharth Roy Kapur, Managing Director, Disney India (Box Office India 2015).

For Disney's Hindi film productions in India such as *Khoobsurat* (2014), *Chennai Express* (2013) and *ABCD: Anybody Can Dance* (2013), Manish Hariprasad, one of the creative directors on the Disney UTV team, said, "I feel the biggest movies in the country are actually the ones that families watch together. That is our single-point agenda for Disney branded movies we produce—to make clean, beautiful, fun, family movies" (Box Office India 2013).

His statement reminds one of a similar film form that dominates the home turf— Bollywood: Hollywood Blockbuster's counterpart in the Hindi film industry. Scholars have pointed it out as a particular genre of Hindi film that enjoys global circulation. It emerged with the rise of the "family film" and the "mall-multiplex phenomenon" in the 1990s. It reimagined movie watching as the middle classes leisurely viewing "clean films" in "clean spaces" (see Athique 2009; Ganti 2012; Prasad 1998; Vasudevan 2008; Viswanath 2007)

This Hindi Blockbuster formula that went on to define "the consumable hero" of the "new" India—the *Rahuls* and *Prems* of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Dil to Pagal Hai* (1997), *Pardes* (1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Kaho Na Pyar Hai* (2000), etc. (Athique 2009)—celebrated the "Hindu undivided family", playing out the aspirations of unbridled consumerism, religion and ritualism (Deshpande 2005: 197–201).

This increasing commercialisation and communalisation of the Hindi film and industry, as observed from the late 1980s, was systemically segmented both by the Indian state and the

corporate sector in the next few decades in order to rebrand India as an economic superpower. So much so that the neoliberal obsession with the consumable hero does not only continue unabated but has over the last decade acquired an unprecedented legitimacy on the national and international stage.

Appreciating the coveted Rs 100 crore mark of *The Jungle Book* (2016) at the Indian box office success, Shah Rukh Khan said that Bollywood has the potential to produce films that would touch everyone across the world. "It is our old '*Jungle Book*' and you can remake it with new technology and that's why it's so enticing. We need to dress up our films in a particular fashion" (Sarkar 2016).

"Imagine a Mahabharat with the VFX of '*The Jungle Book*', '*Avatar*' or '*X-Men*'. It will be mind blowing! It's an international story. Technology can help us reach that. To make an Indian film universal like Mahabharat or Ramayan or Shiva or we can take our heroes like Krishna. The world knows about them," he added.

As special effects and fantasy narratives become the most significant ingredient for films to translate cross-culturally, it is the story cycles of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the character brands of Bheem, Krishna, Hanuman, and Ram that enjoy national and international appeal (Box Office India 2012).

The dressing up in the above comment is reflective of the domestic elite's neoliberal aspiration to emulate Hollywood's tentpole practices of production and distribution for international recognition. The global success of Indian fantasy epic *Bahubali 2* (2017)[1] perhaps best testifies to it. Beset with Hindu fantasy narrative, special effects, corporatised circulation and exhibition, franchise sequels and spin-offs, and brand product licensing, the film checks all the boxes of the contemporary Indian global film.

The effects of globalisation of such Indian films can be seen both inwards and outwards. On the domestic front, we see similar marketing and distribution practices ensuring the survival of the Marathi and other such film industries.

The preservation of a past narrative through the linguistically-oriented territorial notion of the "regional", the corporatised production and multiplex-centred exhibition, the IT-enabled urban middle class spectatorship, among other phenomena, have ensured a "regional" or "vernacular" version of globalisation (see Ingle 2015).

On the international front, we see Disney's *Aladdin* (2019) claiming a Bollywood production aesthetic for best possible economic returns globally. The longest running movie in 2019 in India, *Aladdin* (2019) is arguably known to have kept Bollywood as a reference point.

"I was trying to do my best Bollywood version in this movie and there is a Prince Ali sequence in the film and I kept telling Guy Ritchie you got to go full Bollywood, you have to give them full Bollywood flavour," actor Will Smith said at one of the film's promotional events in Tokyo (NDTV 2019).

"Because how colourful it is, because of the music element … whether it's to do with the costumes or sets … I loved that fact that yes that kind of Bollywood how things just burst out of the screen, that joyousness that really comes through in our movie," added Naomi Scott, the female lead in the film (BBC Asian Network 2019).

On one level, we see the Marathi film industry subscribing to the urban middle-class aesthetic of the multiplex film, as predominantly represented by Bollywood. On the other, there is Bollywood aspiring to churning spectacles out of Indian mythological texts. On yet another, we see an *Aladdin* (2019) being given a Bollywood makeover in terms of sets, costumes, music, dance, and the overall aesthetic so that the film does well at the global box office.

The "postmodern" hype about a common globalised culture and the simultaneous marketing of cultural differences complicates the panorama of globalisation. The cycle of industry practices and visual representations, subsequently generated local cultures, and their reproductions not only accounts for the pressures of the global on the local but also positions such pressures at the centre of explanations of globalisation occurring at all levels. These phenomena prevailing on global-local

levels explain the business activities and cultural attributes that contribute to the global functioning of the neoliberal economic order.

CONCLUSION: THE SPECTACLE OF THE MYTHICAL

The dominant domestic cultural producers' indulgence in what Yan and Santos state as "recollecting and, in some cases, reinventing traditions to recreate an ancient, historical, and unchanging identity" is increasingly co-opted by the once-colonised for its own identification in the postcolonial world (Yan and Santos 2009: 298).

Indian films based on mythological stories such as the epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana have a tremendous potential for both the cinematic and the "essential" Indian grandeur on the global stage. As they aspire to claim their place in the world, they reinvent, reconstruct and renegotiate the national culture and the marketable national identities.

Meeting the ideals of Western modernity for the success of the project of globalisation, these domestic politico-economic agents, in their acts of marketing Indian culture, remain deeply influenced by Oriental scholarship. The Orientalist discourse, however, reflects power relations not only between the West and the Third World, but also within the Third World, where the indigenous dominant ideology played a crucial role in the construction and reinforcement of its early Orientalist representations (Ibid).

Richard King (1999) explains this nexus when he points out that the Western literary knowledge located the core of Indian spirituality and society in Sanskritic texts with a priestly elite (the Brahmin caste) and not with common Hindus. The growth of Orientalist discourse is, therefore, nothing but the domination of the Hindu values carried through right from the days of Kipling to Nehru to the present times.

The new global hero dabbles between technology and ethnicity, be it Black Panther, Aladdin, or Chota Bheem. The increasing status of the Blockbuster form and primordial content is not coincidental. This repeated creation of primordial sentiments, which has been a part of the project

of the modern nation state, represents an even greater promise for the "regional" elite for "global" exchange in the postcolonial world.

Going by the contemporary rise of the right-wing fundamentalism the world over, it is no surprise that the cultural industries across the globe today ride on the popularity of primordialism. The coming-of-age stories of Disney's protagonists in their quest for self-determination and power do not look much different from the fundamentalist political saviours that democratic countries have given rise to through the past four decades.

Scholars have pointed out how globalisation forces corporations to have a competitive advantage in the global market by aggressively propagating nations not as secular, socialist, or welfare states but as identity states. The neoliberal credo of the jungle law of "might is right" has centralised and polarised the societal spheres of economy, polity and culture more than ever today.

As politics based on Hindutva touches an unprecedented high, it is about time we reconsidered the formulation of the problem as "cultural effects" of "economic globalisation". The increasing incitement of economic forces to the primordial identities of people testifies to the intrinsic primordial core of globalisation, where Hollywood giants like Disney endlessly refashion its stories of Aladdin, Tarzan, Mowgli, Simba, and Mulan globally, and Bollywood giants increasingly aspire to reproduce Bheem, Krishna, Hanuman, and Ram to have an instant global advantage.

I, thereby, argue that the forces of globalisation repeatedly churn primordial sentiments privileging the indigenous elite on global-local levels. The neoliberal form of narrative engagement is rooted in the narrative of the native, reinforcing culture-specific valorisation and polarisation. Wrapped in technological innovations, texts such as *The Jungle Book* hold the promise of the bygone glory of the ancient past at every turn of the decade and through every new medium.

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[1] *Bahubali 2* (2017) is the highest grossing Indian film of all time in North America, and the highest ever opening in the IMAX format for a foreign-language film in the continent. Rendering a technologically marvellous experience of the epic, it has led to more big-budget projects of the story cycles of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the making (Ramachandran 2017).

SUB\versions
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Humour as the Weapon of the Weak

A Reflection on Comics at the Grassroots

Rajeswari Saha

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the author's empirical research and field practice on comics as a community media that has been used by marginalised communities in certain parts of India, where the medium of self-expression was owned and made by community, the motive of which was to bring forward the self-expression and personal narratives of the creators. This paper focuses on comics that are developed, circulated, and taught by common people rather than artists or mainstream comics creators, to promote social movements that raised the hope of changing the comics scenario in India. It highlights the intent and phenomenon of grassroots comics along with other parallel comics movements in India.

The visual "text" of the characters in the earlier mainstream comics created a hegemony over the indigenous voices of the country, separating the media from the local people and made it even worse by not attempting to represent the grassroots realities. It is in this context that one needs to understand the emergence of alternative forms of comics that were written to address social realities, gave rise to social movements across the country, and brought forth stories from unknown corners of India. This paper addresses the role of comics as a powerful grassroots voice and the conflicts faced in the creating the comics in the otherwise hegemonic spaces dominated by popular media Keywords:

KEYWORDS

Comics, grassroots, development communication, social movements.

INTRODUCTION TO COMICS

"T*he cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled … an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm.*"

McCloud (1993: 36)

In *Understanding Comics* (1993), Scott McCloud speaks of comics but refers to them as cartoons because for him, to distinguish between cartoons and comics would take as much time as discussing just comics. So, for simplicity's sake, he uses the term "cartoon" to encompass comics. As Meskin (2007) problematised the definitions of comics in his article "Defining Comics", he echoes the definitions of McCloud, Greg Hayman, and Henry Patt in which comics are juxtaposed pictorial narratives either by themselves or corroborated by text. Meskin (2007) points out that these definitions are too broad but unarguably re-establishes that a comic is, by and large, sequential art. Having read and understood comics through McCloud, I would also like to point out that the most interesting point of comics is the space between each panel, which is referred to as the "gutter space" by him. Comics give one the liberty to touch, feel, and imagine the images laid out in a sequence and all at once. Within this understanding, the space between the panels of the comics triggers one's imagination; I regard this as the strongest distinctive feature of comics.

Crutcher (2011) considers comics as representations of imaginations, unlike photographs, as they are drawn. So, unlike film or photography, which have "intrinsic" pretensions to accuracy, comics are "volatile". They move beyond place, could be real or imagined, and are transformed through someone's eyes and hands. Crutcher (2011) further adds that a transposition of roles occurs in the production of comics; the role of an author, voiceover artist, action, drama director, etc., is equivalent to any scriptwriter, director, or editor. Hence, the approach of comics is collaborative and in a narrative form that gives an image to the viewer to understand the locale. The text in the dialogue box corroborates the events and adds more context to the seeing, allowing space for the creator as well reader to interpret realities. The most important aspect of comics is that they contest the notion of

good drawing and emphasise on the text or the content. It shows a fraction of information—as much as is required to make sense of the narrative. It includes a deep process of recalling, reproducing, and illustrating the imagined (Crutcher 2011; Risner 2011). Comics came to India rather late, though there are early precursors to the idea of comics in the ancient traditional picture stories of India.

THE HISTORY OF COMICS

India has been traditionally a hub of visual storytelling and has seen the transition from cave to mural to paper scroll paintings over a period of time. Visual stories or *chitrakatha* can be seen in traditional sequential art and performance art such as Patachitra in West Bengal, Gond in Madhya Pradesh, Chitrakathi in Maharashtra, Phad in Rajasthan, Cheriyal scrolls in Telangana region, and so forth. These traditions of scroll paintings are recorded to be centuries old; some were as old as 2,500 years. The narrative scrolls followed a sequence of being painted either in a horizontal format or vertical format. As the *chitrakar*s or artists unrolled the long scrolls, stories were sung in front of the audience. One can easily identify the presence of a comics culture in the age-old tradition of drawing on scrolls, but unlike comics, the text or narratives were usually sung as a tradition in India (Lent 2015).

Comics are a form of sequential art and, since Indian artists had been acquainted with traditional forms for a long time, they soon adapted to the popular "text" of comics. Hasan (2007) identifies the earliest comic in India being published in *Oudh Punch* (also *Avadh Punch*) based in Lucknow, which began in early 1854 and continued till 1956, and *Delhi Sketchbook* between 1850 and 1857. *Avadh Punch* was an Indian version of the popular political cartoon magazine *Punch* of England that started in 1841. There were many regional versions—Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati, and English—that were produced between 1877 and 1956 by different artists. By 1910, versions of *Punch* were published in Oudh or Avadh itself (Khanduri 2014). Since this comic weekly was published during the colonial period in India, it used comics to create satire about the British Empire.

Menon (2017) notes the evolution of comics in India since 1926 till the contemporary times. She establishes the initial period of the rise of comics as the pre-1950s era, which engendered children's comics such as *Balaak* (established in the year 1926 and published till 1986), *Honhar*, and *Chandamama*

(monthly children magazine, started in the year 1947, illustrated and edited by Kodavantiganti Kutumbarao, an exponent of Telugu literature). *Chandamama* was acquired by the Mumbai-based software company Geodesic Information Systems in 2007 and continues to come out in digitised versions in different regional languages. It was this era that started the children's comics adapted in a third-person narrative or rather in a fashion in which grandparents narrated stories to children, also ascertaining the fact that comics were meant for children. It was between late 1950s and 1960s when the Indian version of international superhero comics, such as *Phantom*, *Mandrake*, *Flash Gordon*, and *Rip Kirby*, came into being, starting the trend of regular syndicated comics strip in India.

The 1960s kicked off the golden era of Indian comics with the advent of Indrajal Comics in 1964, which was launched by the publisher of *The Times of India*—Bennett, Coleman & Co. This series introduced foreign superhero comics of Phantom, Flash Gordon, Mandrake and so forth to the Indian audience. These comics were so popular in the Indian market that a need was felt to introduce an Indian character as well, to whom the Indian readership could relate. Therefore, in 1976, the character "Bahadur", illustrated by Abid Surti, was born and his stories focused on dacoity that was on the rise in India during the 1970s.

This golden era also saw the advent of *Amar Chitrakatha* by Anant Pai 1967, which narrated myths, folktales, and epics from India. The year 1969 saw the birth of Chacha Chowdhury, created by Pran Kumar Sharma, which resonated with the emotions, wit, and humour of a common middle-class man. It was in the year 1980 that *Tinkle*, a fortnightly magazine, brought characters like Suppandi, Shikhari Shambu, and Ramu and Shamu to Indian readership. It was initially introduced in English but, within no time, it was translated in to various Indian regional languages, including Malayalam, Hindi, and Assamese. In 1986, Raj comics brought more superhero content to the Indian readership with characters like Supercommando Dhruv, Nagraj, Parmanu, Bhokal, Shakti, and so on. It is at the same time that the comic *Detective Moochwala*, illustrated by Ajit Ninan, appeared in *Target* magazine, a part of the India Today Group. *Target* also published illustrations by the first female Indian cartoonist Manjula Padmanabhan (Kannan 2004; Khanduri 2010; Kumar 2003).

Traditionally speaking, comics are juxtaposed pictorial narratives that can exist either by themselves

or in corroboration with texts. Every line art made after Amar Chitrakatha in the 1960s was either used for political lampooning or creating mythological narratives. The common comics made for all by the mainstream players were not very successfully in engaging with all kinds of readership; they did not represent the diversity of cultures that constitute rural India. Moreover, the common person was still missing from comics. Even political artist R.K. Laxman's syndicated comics strips in the *Times of India* that portrayed the "common man" had the trappings of the educated, sophisticated man who would be able to read and write, who would understand literature, and could debate politics. There was always a common vantage point from which the mainstream comics looked at the audience.

Comics have been instrumental in bringing developments in the social sector to the public. Comics were introduced in educational textbooks, newspapers, posters, and graphic novels using folk and indigenous art forms, and these experiments had been successful in keeping intact the readership of different age groups (Kannan 2004). The focus was on mythological stories at first, followed by superhero comics; there was a dearth of comics that were made on "grassroots" stories. It was this realisation that built a community around the growth of an alternative comics culture in India that portrayed people's problems and social realities; I am speaking of cartoonists such as Orijit Sen with his graphic novel *River of Stories* (1994) and Sarnath Banerjee with his graphic novel *Corridor* (2004). They introduced local realities and common people's stories to mainstream print. *River of Stories* outlined the environmental issues surrounding the river Narmada and is perhaps a landmark in the history of the Indian graphic novel.

THE MAINSTREAM COMICS

Saima Saeed (2009) reflects on the power the mainstream media has and the way it not only suppresses the flow of information and facts but also mutes the consciousness of people. The option of 100 channels that the cable TV gives us nowadays mutes the critical thinking of human beings, entertains them, and puts them to sleep after a busy schedule of a regular, mundane work life; it does not rattle their conscience, which does not make noise even when their rights are under threat. The viewer again skips channels and puts his/her conscience to sleep.

As mentioned earlier, in the case of mainstream comics, the component of local people and their contexts was still missing in these comics for a long time. This medium of expression did not convey thoughts and ideas of people from the grassroots. The whole concept of local people expressing their ideas through comics is that the person is not producing the piece of art because of any commercial agenda but simply because s/he never had access to this media before and would like to use it to voice her/his concerns. In the process of creating grassroots comics, people get to know how to write their personalised stories in panels (four parts) based on their lived and learnt reality/realities. The story thus is a more grounded representation of the community. This paved way for individuals to communicate, breaking the traditional norms to approach comics as a medium for professionals only to communicate their ideas. During the early 2000s, the idea of grassroots comics came to Sharad Sharma of World Comics India (WCI), and with a bunch of like-minded people, the "wallposter" comics idea was generated by him (Walia 2012). The WCI has been instrumental in forming networks with other implementing agencies that continue to spread the idea of grassroots comics globally through grassroots comics campaigns in order to promote self-expression and first voices of the local people. Such campaigns usually evolve after a series of comics are made by the local people, using local culture and local languages, reflecting certain issues within their lives. The entire process of the campaigns is participative at every step, especially because the people who prepare the campaign material usually get help from their families, friends, and colleagues. While the WCI has been revolutionary in bringing the first ever grassroots comics in India, there are also other individuals and agencies who contested the stereotypical representations in mainstream comics.

The founder of the WCI, Sharad Sharma, along with Rahul Pandita came up with an underground comics on the Manipur social movement "Meira Paibi" in the early 2000s. The 24-page comic booklet was pocket sized and contained incidents and struggles of women protesting against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) signed in 1958.

Figure 1.1: "Drawing on Experience" Source: *The Telegraph* (2004), 26 December. Available from: https://www.telegraphindia.com/culture/style/drawing-on-experience/cid/1549640 [Accessed: 8 May 2021].

Ram Puniyani also speaks about how introducing comics into the Indian context of educational books, history, and literature has changed the reading scenario. His book *Communalism Explained: A Graphic Account*, jointly edited by him and illustrated by cartoonist Sharad Sharma of the WCI, gives an understanding of communalism and terrorism in a question-and-answer comic form. Comics have been used internationally to break complex social theories into visual texts for the social masses, especially students. For instance, in the 1960s, we have the political cartoon books of Eduardo Humberto del Río García, who used the popular pen name Rius to explain Karl Marx's theories and advocated for the Cuban revolution. The most popular amongst the books was *Marx for Beginners*, published in 1972; it marked a similar revolution in education through comics throughout Cuba. Inspired by Rius, the *Beginner* series was adapted by Icon Books from 1992 to explain critical social theories. Rius brought into comics culture a critical visual intervention rather than regarding comics as entertainment or humour meant for children. Recently, a new comic by Sumit Kumar, *Amar Bari Tomar Bari Naxalbari*, narrates the story of Naxalism in West Bengal and the historical and political conflict from 1970s till date. The story is a satire on Naxalbari and the government(s) in power.

In the recent past, the Indian traditional painting forms have been used to narrate stories through comics. The contemporary graphic novel *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar* has used Gond art and text to narrate the story of B.R. Ambedkar and the social events in the life of Dalits in India. The main purpose of the book was to bring forward B.R. Ambedkar's story to the mainstream

graphics industry which otherwise is spoken about in political and/or academic discussion(s) (Jenkins 2015).

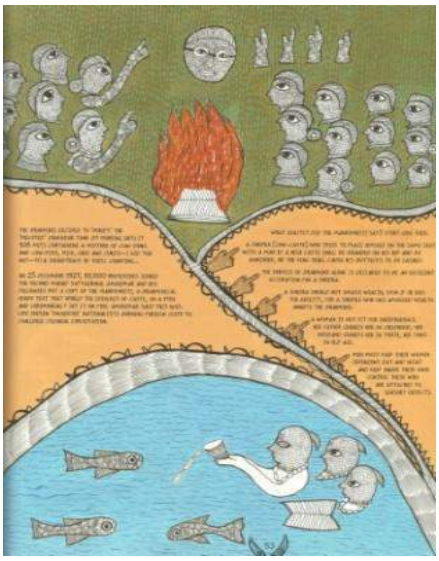

Figure 1.2 Page from 'Bhimayana', story of B.R Ambedkar through Gond folk form.
Source: Jenkins (2015).

The illustrators Aarti Parthsarathi and Chaitanya Krishnan use Indian miniature paintings from various sources and narrate socio-political stories in their weekly webcomic series *Royal Existentials* (www.royalexistentials.com). The Indian miniature paintings are perhaps thousands of years old but the series is refracted through issues of gender, social norms, and political issues of the present times (Narayanan 2014).

Priya's Shakti written by Ram Devineni and Vikas K. Menon and illustrated by Dan is a reality inspired comic book on the Delhi rape case of 2012 that narrates the story of Priya, the protagonist, an ardent follower of goddess Parvati and a sexual assault survivor who wants justice by working for the cause of women rights. She seeks blessing and power from Goddess Parvati to fulfil her cause.

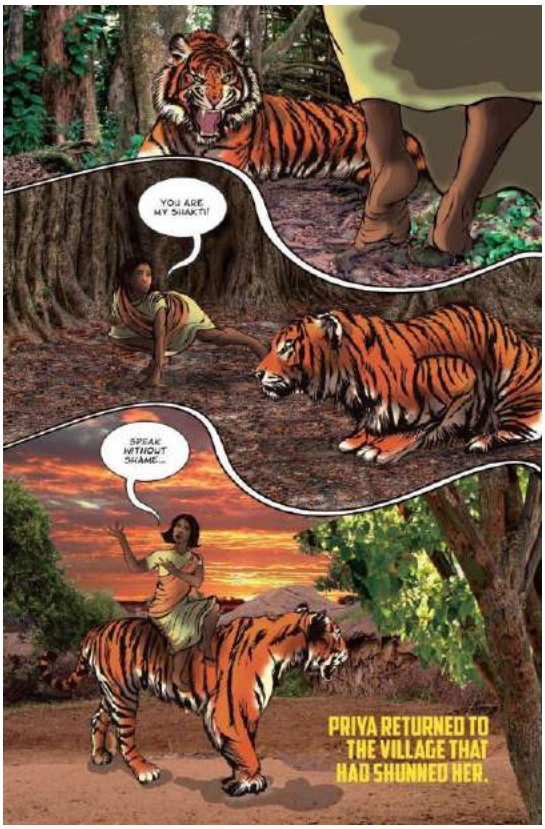

Figure 1.3 A page from 'Priya's Shakti' graphic narrative.
Source: https://issuu.com/rattapallax/docs/comicbook; accessed 25 February 2021.

The illustrators later came up with augmented reality filters in association with the tech organisation Blippars to bring out an app that can communicate with larger audiences and makes the comic more collaborative. Various street art and exhibitions were organised in the cities of Mumbai, Bangalore, and Delhi for better outreach of stories. Their next story, *Priya's Mirror*, deals with acid attack and is based on the real accounts of the survivors; this comic, too, deals with gender-based violence in India.

The Menstruepedia Comic was developed initially as a crowdfunded project by Aditi Gupta, a former student of National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, and her husband Tuhin Paul in 2012. The comic revolves around four characters—Pinki, Jiya, Mira, and Priya—each playing a significant role in telling the story from puberty and first days of having periods to consulting a doctor, each character portraying the nuances of adolescence and menstruation in the simplest way possible. The artists felt that there was a need to portray stories and people that every corner of the country could relate to.

They have successfully adapted the comics in to 10 diverse languages, including Spanish and Nepali, with an outreach of over 75 schools and 50,000 girls living in the rural India. The aim of the artists was that the easy availability of these comics on the web and in print on school bookshelves would ease the initial inhibitions over reading about menstruation and raise consciousness of it (Sahariah 2016).

COMICS AS A COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATION MEDIUM

When two people communicate, the medium of communication plays an important role, and if that medium is made by the people themselves and not a third source, the language of communication takes a leap and is able to narrate thousands of first voices rather than dominant stereotypes (Chute 2006). Communication here calls for a horizontal approach that encourages a dialogue centred on issues concerning a particular community and a bottoms-up approach that is aimed at raising the consciousness of the decision makers (Otsyina and Rosenberg 1997). The meaning of comics transformed slowly over time, in this the point to be stressed is to discuss "who is the creator" and "what is being created". When one looks at the comics' journey in the mainstream media, one can initially identify comics being used as syndicated strips in corners of print magazines and newspapers and to communicate children's stories. One can also notice the creator being a trained artist creating a satirical strip in a mainstream newspaper having their policies and guidelines in place. But imagine when comics are created by people who are not artists but simply using it as means to express their concerns over developmental issues that concern them directly. This places comics as an alternative voice of the oppressed amidst the popular mainstream media, and a community media in this context. In the study, while relating to grassroots communication, many dimensions of comics are focused upon factors such as local cultures, social contexts, and relationships in the community. The old traditional visual storytelling forms that I spoke about earlier had a culture that was shared and passed on from generation to another; the ways of living were shared through these sequential scroll paintings as well. But the moment it was used as a medium for development, the language of the visual text changed, and that is the same with comics. Whether they are popular, drawn comics or traditional art forms transformed into comics, there is a stark difference between being used as a medium for communicating pre-determined messages and being an organic, culturally located art.

Development communication (devcom) now includes participatory action for learning and sharing of power within the social contexts (Srampickal 2006), leading to the emergence of grassroots communication. Hence, in this context, the communication for development processes facilitates a dialogue where power is shared. It is this meaning of devcom that I invoke in my use of the term "grassroots communication". It includes the complete involvement of the local people that affirms democratisation within the specific cultural context. Grassroots communication gives weightage to local people's aspirations and is located in the community culture as it entertains and reifies the same cultural values.

Communication here is understood to link individuals, communities, governments, and citizens through participatory and shared decision-making. Communication media that are owned by the community support the development process through a focus on changing attitudes and initiating a positive dialogue within the community. Development initiatives that begin with communities and organisation(s) refer to social actors participating in social movements that challenge power hierarchies to reach a greater autonomous, self-reliant, and locally owned, independent systems of communication (Servaes [1989], as cited in Srampickal [2006]). In order to achieve this goal, every unit of development process will have its own particular trajectory leading to multiple paths of development, which should primarily define development in cultural terms rather than economic or political terms.

The grassroots communication for development, or what we generally call "devcom" comics, uses this aspect of relationship of the media with the individual who creates it; the medium gives importance to the participation of the local people in creating, narrating, and sharing the skill and, hence, they are termed as being the "first voice" of the community (Packalen and Sharma 2007). Comics can be with or without words; there are comics where the text is absent but still the comics become powerful because of two primary elements: the panels and the quality of putting "as much required text" in the storyboard (Crutcher 2011; Risner 2011). Here the objects represented in the comics, the textures used in the drawing becomes self-representative of the narrative, something left to the audience to decipher. The alternate comics that intend to bring out lived realities such as *Priya's Shakti* or the grassroots comics approach of the WCI bring these first voices to a large readership. These comics might not be much spoken about but are not ignored.

RIPPLE EFFECT: GRASSROOTS COMICS AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT MEDIUM

In the recent past, it has become important for implementing agencies to address social concerns through visual media. These visual media, such as posters, television commercials, radio, print newspapers, theatre, and comics, when created by a mainstream artist, tend to be located in a top-down approach of communication; they do not generate a dialogue because of the difference in language, humour, and visual text. The difference in visual text meant that the dress, behaviour, language spoken, and humour prevalent within the community that needed to be addressed was unlike the posters and other visual media that were generated by the mainstream artist. The participation of the community became important in the media and, hence, the success of community media is growing and helping address social concerns. Apart from other interesting community media, such as community radio, community newspapers, community theatre, community video, and so forth, community comics served as the most efficient and cost-effective medium for the organisation Plan India in an internal survey of 2008–9. Plan India (2008–9) had used comics to generate stories of adolescent children between 10–16 years on corporal punishment and sexual abuse in different parts of Bihar, and replicated the same in other neighbouring states through visual stories that are actually inspired by their lived experiences.

My study on grassroots comics in the years 2009–11 brings forward interesting highlights of comics when used as a devcom medium. The study was based on children working with the organisations Adithi/Plan in Muzaffarpur and the WCI in Delhi. I used a descriptive research design and qualitative research methods to analyse the data. The research initially began in Muzaffarpur, but there were two other districts as well, Sitamarhi and Vaishali, where I found the impact of the medium, with families taking part in the comic-making process. The WCI had conducted workshops in the organisation Adithi/Plan[1] in Muzaffarpur with children, who were beneficiaries of Adithi/Plan. These children

[1] Plan India is a nationally registered organisation and a part of Plan International. Plan India was initiated in 1979 and has been working as a community development organisation, focusing on the child right issues. They are currently working in 11 states across India.
The non-government organisation (NGO) Adithi was registered in the year 1988 and aims at facilitating empowerment of women through economic and social development. Adithi stands for agriculture; dairying; industries (small-scale); tree plantation and tasar silk; handicrafts, handlooms, horticulture; and integration of women in all these sectors. It is based in Bihar.

took part in the comic workshop along other devcom workshops, and started responding quicker to comics than other media such as community theatre, community radio, community newspaper, etc. Hence, comics were later used by the parent organisation to address local governance issues which otherwise could not be addressed through posters and other mainstream media in the community.

THE CAMPAIGN

In 2003, "Diya Puta Manch" (DPM) was set up by Adithi/Plan in Muzaffarpur, where both girls and boys would participate equally in campaigns pertaining to healthcare, education, etc., the funders and the organisers, after reviewing the outcomes of the fieldwork, saw that communities did not develop the thought process to give importance to a child's viewpoint. Keeping all this in mind, two things cropped up: first was that the elders in the community thought that the Adithi/Plan was trying to make children rebellious; and second was that the children felt that somehow they were not able to utilise their full creative potential, as a result of which the child club—DPM—was difficult to sustain. For the funders it was always necessary to forward the voices of the children in the community. Also, the organisers are seen as outsiders in the community. Hence, the first step was to include a personality development[2] training programme for children, where inclusive forms of media were used. This generated massive participation from the community and, in turn, boosted the confidence of the children. Adithi then initiated the "Nikhar Project" to provide a platform to children where they could discuss their issues with panchayat raj institution (PRI) members, ward members, and block-level government officials. They had over 45 children clubs operational and identified 25 more with whom they decided to work. Issues related to child protection and child rights were discussed in meetings of these child clubs. The project implementers and the children articulated that children took out a drive on "*Jan Panjikaran*" (public registration) in their community and as a group and collected 672 responses from the survey. They conducted this drive because they realised that many children in the community could not take admission in schools as they did not have any identity proof. Most of the respondents

Adithi/Plan project is based on a child-centred community development approach and the project is a partnership between Adithi and Plan India working through partnership. Adithi/Plan project is a co-ordinated effort to improve the status of children in the community so that all kids can enjoy their rights of survival, education, and participation.

[2] Personality development: For Adithi/Plan personality development programmes were equivalent to skill development programmes, the outcome of which was to express and become active participants in making decisions of their respective villages. The final outcome of the project was the initiate a Campaign planned and implemented by children where the medium was comics.

shared that if elders in the community were not addressing these issues of child rights, at least someone has to, then why not the children. So, discussions were carried out to regularise child club meetings. Subsequent meetings were followed with the PRI members and block-level governing officials to discuss local governance issues.

One of the objectives of the Nikhar Project was to increase the interaction between the community children and the panchayat. When the block-level campaign was organised in *Kanti (city in Bihar, India),* the *Mukhiya* (head) addressed the issues of corporal punishment and birth registration. He called for a meeting with the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM), Aanganwadi workers, and the Adithi/Plan to discuss the issue of birth registration and ways to promote it. He also visited the schools to evaluate the situation. The Block Development Officers showed interest in seeing the children and suggested putting up a campaign for 33 district development commissioners who were coming to *Kanti*. The campaign was put into action and got support from various local mainstream media. When the Nikhar Project, the initial project that trained all children in diverse community media, was launched, Adithi's objective was to provide a platform to the children and equip them with media tools so that they can voice their opinion(s). The next stage was to see the reaction of the people towards these tools.

The children were exposed to various forms of community media for many years by now and even with comics the journey from creating a story and expressing it in wallposter comics was a smooth one. Children used comics as a medium to express and disseminate information in the campaign, which was named "*Ab Shasan Humro Hoi*" ("It's Our Rule Now"). The workshops that were initially conducted by the WCI lasted five days, where basic skills were imparted, and at each step of the workshop, children learned to draw. In this process, basic stick figure drawings and facial expressions using OT[3] technique was imparted to the children. For instance:

[3] In OT exercise, the use of alphabets O and T are used to teach the basic facial expressions.

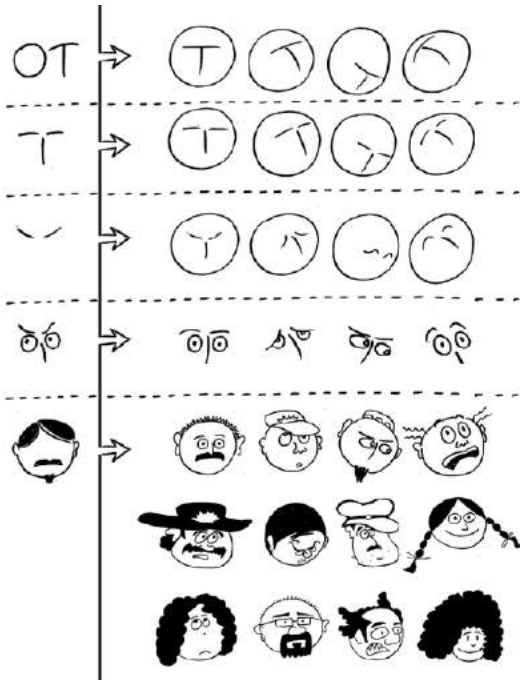

Figure 1.4 Facial expressions using alphabet O and T *Source*: World Comics India Comics Manual handbook Page 13 https://www.worldcomicsindia.com/Manuals/BASIC_MANUAL_Eng.pdf

Following the drawing exercise, children were taught how to write a story, break that into a story board and then the final comics making process took place. First, the stories were pencil drawn in four panels on two A4 sheets pasted horizontally to make an A2 wallposter comics. Then, black ink was used to trace the drawings, and finally, the pencil marks were erased and final copies were photocopied at the nearest shops. The resources used were planned keeping in mind that pencils, A4 sheets, pens, rulers, erasers, and photocopy shops can be found in every part of rural India. The last day consisted of a field trip, which brought out the exact reason the workshop was conducted with the children in the first place. The field trip indicated that the final comics were to be shown to their own community people, pasted on community notice boards, schools, trees, and lamp posts for the community to react to and share their feedback. That process was what made the medium of comics more collaborative than used in print mainstream.

Figure 1.5: A comic made during the Campaign "Ab Shasan Humro Hoi" in 2009

The interesting part of a grassroots comics movement is that it gave a first-hand exposure to children, in this case, particularly regarding thinking critically about their social environment, enabling them to take part in social action. The previous campaigns by the WCI on sexual abuse, corporal punishment, and local governance in different states had a ripple effect in the neighbouring rural areas. Reproducibility of grassroots comics made it convenient to make voices heard. The comics were replicated and more and more people were drawn into the campaign because an otherwise-serious and sensitive topic was handled with much ease and humour. The replication of comics was also an easy and cost-effective process, which again makes it an ideal community medium. At a larger level of the community, the pattern of participation involves communication strategies instilled in the process of developing the community and balancing the relationship. The kind of horizontal communication that was exhibited in the process was moving from an initial focus of informing and persuading people to

change their behaviour or attitudes to facilitating exchanges between different stakeholders to address the common problem of good governance. The children developed the skill, and shared the idea of what they found as innovative communication with their parents; the parents and the siblings naturally became recipients of the information and the communication process. This evoked interest in other communities (at locations like Kanti, Aghoria Bazar, Bochaha, Katra, and Sikanderpur) participating in a process where the production and outcome are controlled by the children. Receiving responses and the power to be heard in their own neighbourhood gave a sense of ownership within the community for the children. This led to a common development initiative with the local panchayat and block officials to experiment with possible solutions and to identify what is needed to support the initiative in terms of partnerships with the local or block officials besides knowledge and material dissemination.

The children took part in a process like this because they loved making comics, their families took part in this because their children made the comics, and finally their neighbours took part in it because the stories made were relatable. The narratives built were not of Super Commando Dhruva (character in Raj comics) but of their own village boys and girls. The children's participation drew some attention from their parents and they slowly liked the idea that they were doing something serious but through comics. They were glad that the children were eager to read newspapers and books and adapt themselves to make better comics. In comics as well, "content is the king". The better the content, the better the readability and the greater the interest of children of these communities in relevant content. They knew that fine drawing was not necessary; they wanted to speak, even if through "stick figures".

CONCLUSION

As I speak of comics evoking humour at the grassroots level and effectively carrying out a successful campaign in a rural setting, I am talking about a place that did not have any access to mainstream media. It is very recently that my research site got access to television and radio. It upsets me to think about comics and artists targeted for commenting on the state of affairs or simply because they are making comics on political events. On social media and within the mostly developed urban society, the consumption of comics or satire has started to offend people, and slowly, the use of comics has created uproar without having the sensibility to maturely debate. The use of humour and satire,

particularly on the Internet, in comics, by stand-up comedians, or videos on socio-political and religious issues or celebrities, has begun to offend sections of urban classes. What was once understood as satire is seen with intolerance as "anti-national" for many common people living in the metropolis. The rise of religious fundamentalism in the current era of right-wing governments in India and elsewhere has resulted in intolerant and sometimes violent reactions to humour and satire. In the Indian context, nationalism has taken on hard connotations, tied up with Hindu gods and mythical symbols, such as the cow, which cannot be questioned or made fun of. The emergence of a politics of hate, involving the othering of minorities and those who think differently, and demanding rigid observance of certain rituals of nationalism have led to a decline in openness to engaging with humour.

Further, there have been a few instances of comics and comedians enraging "nationalist" sentiments. In 2012, Aseem Trivedi, a political cartoonist, was arrested for mocking the Constitution (Ghosh 2012). In 2016, the political group Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) filed a FIR against comedian Tanmay Bhatt of the popular comedy group All India Bakchod (AIB) for posting a Snapchat of face swap between Lata Mangeshkar, an Indian playback singer, and Sachin Tendulkar who was once an ace player in the Indian cricket team. The MNS felt that the national icons were made fun of and disrespected (Bose 2016). In 2017, Nituparna Rajbonshi received a death threat for linking the Gorakhpur tragedy with the current government. In his cartoon, he had talked about the rise in crime against women and farmer suicides and very recently in 2021 a popular stand-up comedian named Munawar Iqbal Faruqui got arrested for a joke he never uttered yet misunderstood by organisers and audience (Faleiro 2021). Comics have the audacity to talk about big issues through minimalist concrete messages and, without doubt, give the scope to people to understand and appreciate humour and satire. The medium of comics has been largely experimental. Apart from superhero comics, there have been newer underground comics, comics on war, and comics with the women as central characters. Along with its many elements, it still remains an active generator of satire in the genre of visual literature.

I have always been fascinated with comics because they gave me the ability to imagine more visually than reading plain text does. The panel boxes were an interesting space to watch for. The panels show the images that are required to narrate the story, anything that is not required or seems aesthetic is not portrayed in a comic panel. The journey from one panel to the other is the most spectacular one, and

that makes comics a very interesting medium. As we understand noise in communication, gutter-box represents that noise, created to make the audience extremely imaginative. The gutter space is a particularly interesting feature: one can kill or give birth in this space—it is right in front of the viewer, giving time to jump between sequences, to think what would happen next. Such is the imaginative power that is elicited by comics.

The alternative form of comics that is undertaken by many artists in India, which I have already discussed, have powerful content but are still not accessible to the general masses who cannot read and write in English or who cannot understand the kind of humour in those comics. I feel the alternative comics are created for a bunch of elite readers; right now, the developmental approach is fully missing. However, this demand is slowly being fulfilled by the WCI. The more the idea of community comics reaches the corners of the marginalised communities, the better the understanding of comics as a "weapon of the weak" can be established. The grassroots comics idea of the WCI establishes one such start to affirm that the self-expression of the community is of paramount importance. Though a medium such as comics is reproducible, easily learned, adapted, and recreated, it is unfortunately not being used to the fullest extent for facilitating horizontal communication and development. Perhaps it will take some more years to have artists in every corner of rural India using comics and creating their own augmented reality versions of it, which can only be possible if the medium reaches those living in the marginalised communities.

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